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(He Walked Through Solid Stone!)
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(No Woman Could Resist Him!)
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THE MAN WHO READS MINDS
(He Knew Her Most Intimate Thoughts!)
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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS
(Bank Teller by Day; A Superman by Night!)
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EXCITING STORIES OF PEOPLE WITH INCREDIBLE POWERS!
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THEY WRITE...

JOHN TOLAND

AFTER a haphazard and happy childhood in Wisconsin and Connecticut, I worked my way through Phillips Exeter and Williams College (1936) by waiting on tables, getting scholarships and playing bridge. I made so much money running a bookstore at college, an oil company offered me a job. But I'd worked so I could relax when I graduated. I relaxed a year at the Yale Drama School and then, feeling my schooling was one-sided, spent most of the next three years riding freight trains and inspecting town and country jails. I am registered as a vagrant in about twenty crummy bastilles under such literary names as Ivan Turgenev and Henry Fielding.

I'd started writing plays as a Freshman and when World War Two started I'd completed sixteen. None ever reached Broadway. I enlisted in the Air Corps as a private, expecting to be a glider pilot. I ended up as a captain in the bloody Battle of Fifth Avenue. As John Shubert's assistant in the Special Services Division I routined U.S.O. Camp Shows units. My only war wound came when a filing cabinet fell on my hand. This resulted in the happiest month of my army career — a month's stopover at Staten Island Regional Hospital where I finished my first novel. Pascal Covici of Viking Press was impressed by the book and gave me a contract. This encouraged me to write two serious novels which weren't very good. As recreation I did a comedy novelet, "Water Cure." Howard Browne bought it for FANTASTIC. A very good literary agent, Rogers Terrill, read this story and persuaded me to write for the slick magazines. In six months I'd sold to American, True, Argosy, Cavalier, etc. Although I'm still writing shorts and articles, I'm also working on a novel about young hoboes of the depression.

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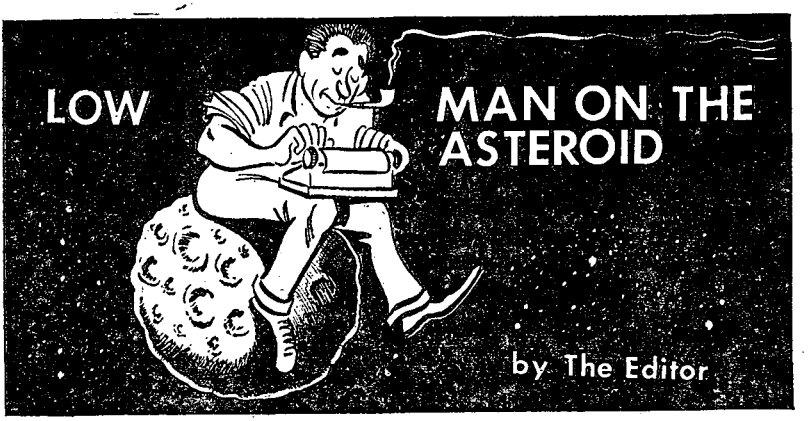

I SEE BY THE PAPERS . . .

So they're gonna stick one of them arty-fish-al sat-a-lites up in the air, hunh? Boy, what them Republicans won't think of next! Says here it'll be about the size of a basketball. At 250 miles up it'll take a Stilts Wilt to play in that league. What about passengers? Guess they'll have to use midgets or something. Wonder what it's like up there. Probably hot as hell, what with being so close to the sun and all. What I don't get is if there's no air up there how'll the thing fly? . . . Here's a picture of the scientists talking things over. Man, what a bunch of tall foreheads! Way they sound, this must be the biggest thing since Mickey Mantle.

So that's Willy Ley. I remember hearing something about him in one of the big magazines. *Collier's,* I think it was. He looks like he knows the score all right. Says this is the opening of a new era. I sure hope it's a better one than the old one. Hey, here's a hot one! They're gonna bounce TV programs off the thing! How d'ya like that? They ever hit it with one of them singing commercials and the whole business will fall apart!

Yes, sir, sure shows we're living in the age of miracles. Guess the next stop will be Mars. Seems as if them science-fiction bugs knew all along what they were talking about. Wonder what it costs to subscribe to one of them magazines with the funny-looking machines on the cover.

—H. B.

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ALL WALLS WERE MIST

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

How would you like to move through solid walls? All the wealth of the world yours for the taking! That's what Stan thought—until he walked in on a girl . . . at the very best time!

STAN would never have got involved in the thing had it not been one of those rare occasions when he felt sorry for himself. No doubt, everyone feels sorry for himself at one time or another, and this just happened to be Stan's day for it.

First, there was the bad day at the office, with Ned Wilkerson getting the promotion to copy chief that Stan had worked for and was entitled to. Then, the blowup with Mitzi. That had been Stan's fault of course. He'd arrived at her apartment with the office defeat on his mind and within five minutes they were

"Come to me, Stan!" she cooed.

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"Hold it!" his secretary said. "There's work to be done!"

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fighting, because Mitzi, that delicious little firebrand, wasn't one to be snarled at without snarling back. Five more minutes had cleaned up their evening together and Stan had walked the street to wander finally into this greasy little restaurant to stare into a cup of vicious looking coffee and brood over his misfortunes.

A newspaper lay on the table at his elbow, discarded by some diner, and Stan stared at it for several minutes without knowing it was there.

After a while, his eyes focused, digested the scare-line, and for want of something more amusing to do, sent the gist of it up the receiving room in Stan's brain. There, a bell was tapped for attention and Stan pondered the words:

WHATEVER MAN DESIRES

They were part of an advertisement in a box on the open page of the paper. It was a very bad advertisement. There was a picture of a man holding an armful of items including a country estate with a swimming pool, a basket of dollar signs, a wife in a bathing suit with several children also in bathing suits, a limousine perched on the gable of the house and a couple of convertibles tumbling toward the bottom of the page because the man just couldn't hold them.

There was additional copy written by some unfortunate who had to be past blushing at blatant falsehood:

Not one man in a million realizes the power of the human brain. All things are created by mental power and the unused cells in your brain are capable of miracles if only given a chance to function. Your brain is like your arm. If you wore your arm in a sling all your life, it would be weak and useless. When you neglect to use the powerful cells of your brain, they cease to function. The Kali School of Mind Power can show you how to remedy this sad situation. Come and see us! Take your brain out of its sling and put it to work! We will show you how. The Kali School of Mind Power, 1118 South Street. Open Evenings for those who yearn to achieve! Do it tonight!

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Stan tasted his coffee and made a face. He read the ad again, seeking flaws in the technique of commercial copy writing and found seven. Then his subconscious mind, which had always been a sucker for such tripe although he knew it not, decided this was worth looking into.

But it knew from experience that it would not get even halfway to first by being honest, so it suggested: *Let's go over and have a look at a joint that would pay good money for such an outrageously stupid ad.*

That put the thing into the field of research; put it in a manner Stan's conscious mind could accept. So he left the restaurant and walked four blocks south and arrived at the address noted.

It was in a bad section of town, a section where the rent was very cheap. The number was over a tired-looking door at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs dimly lit by a single naked bulb at the bottom. Stan climbed slowly, thinking that this was a strange place for people who could get anything they wanted. Maybe they didn't want much, he thought, and stopped at a door with the name in the ad painted on the upper half of the panel.

Inside, he found a bleak, dirty-walled room with a raised platform at the front, the rest of the floor space filled by folding chairs that could easily have been passed up by scavangers prospecting a city dump.

In a rear corner to the left, Stan saw what was obviously the office; a six-by-six cubicle walled off halfway to the ceiling by thick-looking frosted glass panels.

But all this, Stan noted but swiftly and in passing, while he stood there completely amazed at something else: the people who sat here and there on the rickety chairs, evidently waiting for the meeting to begin. There were perhaps a dozen of them and they belonged in this cheap, dirty setting, the same way a member of the W.C.T.U. would belong dead drunk under some bar.

Stan's eyes lingered for a time on a beautiful young woman who sat nearby with a sapphire mink coat over her arm. The coat wholesaled at four grand, he thought, if it wholesaled for a dime. And that was not all. The dress she wore was an original right off a Parisian mannequin—of that he was sure—and he stood there for a while visualizing what she had on

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underneath the dress and the price thereof.

When he caught himself going beneath the underthings to visualize what rested there, he jerked his mind away hurriedly and sent his eyes over the rest of the crowd. At least three of the men present could have stepped right in front of a camera to pose for the Man of Distinction whiskey ads. The nearby blonde was not the only beautiful girl in the room, either. And the whole bunch smelled of money so strongly that Stan felt he should open a window.

Numb with wonder at the glaring contrast of all this, Stan turned slowly and took a step toward the glassed-in cubicle. Then, acting upon the spur of the moment, he reversed himself, walked to where the blonde was sitting, and took the chair next to her. "I beg your pardon," he said in a low, polite voice.

She turned and looked him over calmly, but without resentment. She took quite a little time in the looking as her arresting blue eyes traveled upward from his shoes, covered every inch frankly and stopped at his curly black hair. He noted the change in her expression as the inspection progressed. Her interest in his shoes and the crease of his pants had not been marked, but from that point upward the girl brightened until friendly interest broke out in the form of a smile when her eyes reached his.

"Yes?"

"I—I'm a newcomer here," Stan said. "I was just wondering what—"

Then the smile deepened. "Yes? You were wondering what—?"

"What is this place? Who runs it?"

"It's precisely what the name implies. A school for the development of mind power." She had moved closer to him. The action had been casual and apparently unconscious, but the effect upon Stan was very definite. This girl had exciting qualities about her and he suddenly found it a little hard to breathe what with his heartbeat acting up the way it did.

As he caught his breath, the girl's eyes turned from friendly to mischievous, glanced down the length of him and back again and were now brimming with merriment. "Oh, my goodness!" she murmured and the eyes were lowered in mocking maidenly modesty.

Stan's eyes grew suddenly hot. It was, he thought, almost

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as though she had become aware of—that she knew—could actually see— He gulped and spoke hurriedly. "There doesn't seem to be anyone in charge. Who—"

"Doctor Abat Singh is the founder and master of the school. He— By the way, what is your name?"

Stan could not understand the bright interest with which she appeared to regard his clothing. It was as though she had never seen a suit quite like his before and wanted to remember every detail, every inch of it. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry. My name is Stanley Kingston." He held out his hand and waited expectantly.

She took it, squeezed it intimately as though they shared some personal secret. "I'm Joyce Hager and I'm delighted to know you."

"It's mutual. Now this Abat Singh. What kind of a racket—"

She leaned forward and placed a finger over his lips. "Please! Sound carries here. Don't let the Doctor hear you or you won't be admitted."

"I'm not sure I want to be." He looked around the room with a deprecating gesture. "This place. These people—"

"Do you find something wrong with the people?"

"No. No, of course not. That's the part of it that mystifies me—"

"Don't worry about it—Stan—" the gorgeous eyes twinkled and Stan thought of Mitzi and the fire that flared up in her's on occasion. "Just keep this thought in mind," Joyce Hager went on. "When a person finds something good—something valuable—he is not inclined to tell the world about it. I—" she gestured toward the others—"we are not here for our health."

"I wouldn't want to dispute you, but I don't get this not-telling-the-world business. I found the school's ad in a newspaper where millions of people are free to read it."

She laughed. The laugh was low and musical. It had a sexy quality in it and only added to Stan's uncomfortable condition. "That means nothing at all. It has to do with the law; some statute that says a school must be open to the public. But the people who answer the ad are turned away. As things stand, you haven't a chance in the world of being admitted to the school."

"Why that's absurd!"

"Want to bet?"

Before Stan could answer, the door to the cubicle opened and a dejected looking young

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man came out, walked to the door, and left the hall. Then the figure of a man was outlined in the cubicle entrance.

Joyce whispered, "Okay, there's the Doctor. Go on in and try your luck."

As Stan arose from his chair, the man motioned toward him and Stan moved toward the cubicle. As he walked, he sized up Doctor Abat Singh. The man may have been a doctor, he thought, but he looked more like a coal heaver or a longshoreman. He had a dark, forbidding, whiskered face and a pair of shoulders that made Stan think he must have been wearing the cross-beam of a derrick under his shirt. His look and general bearing were hostile as Stan approached. He stepped back into the cubicle and motioned Stan inside and onto an uncomfortable, straight-backed chair. He, himself, sat down in a rocker that creaked under his weight. He said, "What can I do for you?"

Stan gulped. This man had an aura of power about him that was almost stifling in so small a space. Stan said. "I—I saw your ad, and—"

"A lot of people see my ad."

"I—I came up to inquire about—"

"First, let's talk about money. This interview is not gratis. I'll have to have fifty dollars before we go any further."

Stan gulped in real earnest. "I, why I—"

"Have you got the fifty, or haven't you?"

"Yes—yes, I've got fifty dollars on me, but—"

"All right, but before you give it to me let me explain that it won't be enough."

"But you just said—"

"I said the interview costs fifty. After that, two hundred is required for the initiation fee if you're accepted. You must have that in your pocket also as we can't waste time while you run and get it."

Stan gaped. "Well, of all the—"

"Then, after you've paid the initiation fee, there is the class tonight. That costs three hundred more. So in all, if you haven't got five and a half bills in your pocket, you might as well be on your way."

Stan got to his feet. "This is the weirdest one I ever bumped into. How many people walk in your door with five hundred dollars in their pockets?"

"Not very many."

"Then it follows that you don't want students."

"You said that; I didn't."

Hot anger was welling up

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in Stan in spite of the personal power he had to face in this man. He said, "Abat Singh! You're no more of an Indian than I am. You never saw India!"

"Who said I am? Who said I did?"

"Of all the—!"

Look, chum. Why not just scram out of here and save us both time?"

Stan's voice had risen and could obviously be heard all over the hall and at that moment there was a tap on the door. Doctor Abat Singh grunted, "Come in," and the gorgeous face of Joyce Hager appeared in the doorway. "Might I have a word with you, Doctor?" she asked.

Singh grunted assent and Joyce said, "Please wait outside, Stanley."

Stan felt rather numb as he stood in the rear of the hall while the conference went on inside. A few minutes passed after which Joyce came out and approached him. "It's all right," she whispered. "Go back in there and for heaven's sake, be humble! Don't antagonize him. Here."

Stan felt something shoved into his hand and he walked like a man in a trance back into the room. Just before the door closed, he was conscious of something boring into him from behind. He turned and saw nothing but Joyce Hager's eyes, glowing as they studied the weave of the cloth in his topcoat.

Singh eyed him with distaste and said, "All right, you're in. Now this is the pitch. I'm going to teach you how to use your brain. It will get you anything you want if you give it a chance. You probably don't know yourself what you want, but your subconscious does. So all you have to do is what I tell you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Slip me the five fifty."

Stan raised his hand helplessly. "I don't—"

Singh reached out and took what Joyce had thrust upon Stan as he entered the cubicle. Singh spread it out and counted it. It came to five hundred and fifty dollars. "You don't what?" Singh asked.

"I—I don't know where that came from."

"The Hager babe loaned it to you. Can't see where you're worth it but that's her business. Now listen. We're going to have a meeting now and when we get out there, I want you to hold your mind on the thing you want most—or the thing you think you want most. It will be tough for a

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while, but I'll be on the platform acting as a sort of control—a sort of primer—charging your mind. That's what you paid me for. You'll need several sessions before you're able to hold a thought in your mind for more than an hour. I doubt if you could hold one for more than thirty seconds now, and exclude all others. But I'll get you started and after a while you'll only have to come back for a strengthening once in a while. Those people out there are here for that."

"But the three hundred dollars every time I come—"

"Who said anything about paying three hundred every time?"

"Then the three hundred covers all the sessions?"

"Like hell it does. The second one costs four bills, the next five until it get up to a grand a visit. It stays there."

"Good lord, man! I haven't got that kind of money."

"You'll get it."

"How?"

"You got the five hundred didn't you?"

Singh got up and strode out into the hall. All eyes turned in his direction. Stan watched him also. Singh was right. He *had* gotten the five hundred and now he wondered why Joyce Hager had given it to him.

He moved toward her and she turned and smiled at him from her seat. He sat down beside her and found her eyes still twinkling. When she spoke it was in an almost motherly voice. "I see you're feeling better now."

"Why did you push that five hundred dollars into my hand?"

"Because I wanted you to stay."

"But I'll never be able to pay it back."

"Yes you will."

"I'd certainly like to know how."

"You'll find out soon. Let's listen to the Doctor now."

Singh stood on the platform and glowered down at his pupils. "Well, how are things going. Any problems?"

One of the distinguished looking men got up. "I've had a little trouble with the blue lights, Doctor."

"How about results?"

"The results have been very good. I turned a twenty-thousand-dollar stock deal last week."

"But the red and violet keep coming instead of the blue?"

"Yes, Doctor." The man seemed a trifle embarrassed and Stan wondered why. "What are they talking

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about?" he asked Joyce in a whisper.

"When you concentrate correctly with your eyes closed, the spectrum manifests itself —blue is mental. The red and purple are, well, carnal. You'll have trouble with the lights too . . . I hope," and again she smiled deliciously.

"We'll concentrate on the blue tonight," Doctor Singh said. "Now everybody quiet."

"What are you going to concentrate on?" Joyce asked.

"A promotion I didn't get. Or is that a waste of time?"

"No—if you want the promotion." Joyce turned away from him to face forward. She sat erect, as did all the pupils, set the tips of her fingers together and closed her eyes.

Stan did likewise, feeling a little foolish. But five hundred and fifty bucks had been swept down the drain and he was going to get something out of it if it were only a chance to rest his eyes. In the dead silence, he visualized the desk in the private office he'd have gotten with the promotion. He tried to hold his mind on it rigidly, seeing himself sitting there, bright, clean-shaven, alert, making big decisions.

He held the picture for perhaps ten seconds, then his mind wandered and he saw Mitzi storming around the apartment calling him names. He jerked his mind back to the desk. The promotion—the promotion—the promotion . . .

He realized there was perspiration on his forehead. This surprised him. He wasn't exercizing and had never before raised a sweat merely from thinking.

Then he was conscious of something else—a kind of singing power in the air all around, an exhilarating vibration sweeping through his mind and body. The surge of power increased and he had no trouble in holding his mind on the desk, holding the thought of promotion, almost as a tangible entity, in his mind.

And gradually, a light began to bloom behind his tightly closed eyes: a blue, shadowless light that seemed electric, living, beautiful.

The surging, crackling power increased until it was like a tingling needle bath beating through his mind and washing away all weakness, all laziness, all doubt.

And he knew what he really was, how powerful, skillful and able. A sense of sheer exhilaration went through him

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and it was as though, for the first time in his life, he had really awakened; a spreading and deepening of consciousness that was like the drawing back of a curtain revealing his power for the first time. And he knew beyond all doubt that he would get the promotion even though it had already been given to someone else. How he would get it he did not know nor care. He only knew that it was his —even with Mitzi sitting there on the—Good heavens! What had happened!

So intensely had he been concentrating upon the desk and the office—his mental symbol of the promotion—that he'd scarcely noticed Mitzi enter the phantom office and perk on the desk behind which his mental self sat; noticed her hardly at all until the blue light changed to a soft radiant violet and he saw that Mitzi was completely nude; sitting there smiling at him without a stitch of clothing on.

His eyes snapped open and he came back to reality; the shabby hall, the disconcertingly well-dressed people, to discover that the session was over, that Doctor Singh was striding down the aisle toward his cubicle, and the people were filing out.

Joyce Hager was smiling at him. "How did it go?"

Stan felt weak. He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked at her in somewhat of a daze. "I—I don't quite know. I never had such an experience!"

"How were the lights?"

"Everything was blue and —and there was a kind of power—"

"Most of it came from the Doctor. He generates a terrific creative force and projects it into your mind. Did you concentrate on your promotion?"

"Yes and—for a while there was no doubt in my mind. But the promotion is gone."

"No it isn't."

Stan got shakily to his feet. "Can—can we go somewhere and talk—that is if—"

"Certainly. What about my place?"

Joyce had a sumptuous three-room apartment and she had changed into a breathtaking robe that clung like her own skin, but Stan hardly noticed either. He sat down in the chair she indicated and said, "Please tell me all about this—this miracle."

She shrugged. "It's very simple. Remember what the ad said? Most people go through life using only about

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ten percent of their brain power. Your whole brain was put in your head to be used and there's really no limit to what it will do for you if you just use it."

"You mean those prosperous, well-dressed people—"

"Were very ordinary failures until they came to Doctor Singh. They followed his instructions, and things began happening to them, good things. I was selling blouses in a department store and practically starving to death. Now look at me."

Stan looked and reddened in embarrassment. "There's—there's something I'd like to ask you—something that happened. But maybe I'd better wait and ask the Doctor about it."

She looked at him narrowly, "Just consider me a pal," she said softly and leaned closer.

"Well, there was that blue light and the promotion I was concentrating on—it was all very clear. Then the lights changed to violet and my—my girl was sitting on the desk, and—"

"And she didn't have any clothes on."

Stan blinked. "How did you know?"

She laughed throatily. "Once you get into this thing, you'll find all sorts of nice things happening."

"But how did you know that—"

"Sometimes people don't know what they really want or what really goes on in their subconscious minds. The conscious mind is ringed around and controlled by inhibitions and the rules of 'nice' society and all that sort of thing. But the subconscious know no such restrictions, so figure it out for yourself. It goes romping ahead, sort of setting things up so to speak. When you meet a girl and start going out with her, your conscious mind stays polite and civilized, but the subconscious doesn't fool around. It knows exactly what you're after in all cases."

Stan's face flamed. "Why—why this is outrageous."

"Your subconscious doesn't think so," Joyce said. "Wait until you really go to work on yourself. You'll be surprised what happens."

"You mean—?"

"Uh-huh."

She was very close again and Stan's discomfort was returning. He got to his feet. "I think I'd better be going now. And about the five hundred. I'll pay it back as soon as I can get that much together."

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"It won't be long," Joyce said. "Don't worry about it."

When he got home, Stan undressed and put on his pajamas and then sat down on a straight-backed chair with his shoulders erect and the tips of his fingers together in his lap. Could he do it again, he wondered, without the remarkable Doctor Singh there to fill him with the strange power?

He would try concentrating on the promotion again. Resolutely setting his mind, he tried to visualize the office and the desk. But it was different now. There didn't seem to be any of the power available at the moment. And it seemed impossible to keep his mind focused on a single thought. The office and the desk were not at all clear and every time he got a mental picture, his mind went wandering off in another direction.

He struggled for fifteen minutes and was not able to raise even a single drop of sweat. He was about ready to give up, when suddenly a surge of power swept through him.

He was floating in a warm, restful cloud of violet, floating unfettered in a sea of strange power. All physical limitations seemed to vanish. He was a superman, capable of going and coming as he pleased.

Then an alluring, magnetic voice called from somewhere. "Here, darling. I'm here. Waiting. Don't keep me waiting, sweet. Come to me."

Stan peered about, looking for the one who had called. A woman's voice and somehow familiar. He felt he should have recognized it immediately. He felt, also, that he should obey; do as the voice directed; follow the pull of magnetic power.

And he did, drifting through the warm violet light toward the voice. But something got in the way; another pull that had no voice and functioned in silence but was far stronger than the other. The voice called to him sharply, filled with vexation, but it faded and died as the violet cloud thinned and vanished and Stan was in a room.

He knew the room. Mitzi's apartment, with the roses he'd bought her several days before dying gracefully on the table under the window. He stood there in the middle of the room and tried to analyze the situation. This was a dream, of course. It had to be.

But was it? Certainly it was like no dream he'd ever had before. Suddenly he ex-

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tended his arm and brought the heel of his other hand down sharply on the bared wrist. It hurt. It hurt so sharply that he yelped without meaning to. Real pain.

He was rubbing his wrist when the door to the bedroom opened and Mitzi looked out. There was sleep in her eyes and a slight questioning frown on her face, but all Stan could see was the dewiness of her complexion; the fresh budding beauty of Mitzi; the loveliness that made him ache to reach for her and tell her how sorry he was that they'd quarreled.

Mitzi showed pearly teeth in a little cat-yawn and went to the outer door and opened it and looked into the hall. She closed the door and turned back and looked around the room.

Stan said, "Mitzi! Why the act? Why give me the cold shoulder. Let's stop acting like children!"

Mitzi looked at the clock on the TV set. It read seven-forty-five. She stretched with the grace of a young tigress, the lines of her body pressing forward against the filmy material of her nightgown in a way that made Stan's heart miss several beats.

Then she walked back into the bedroom while Stan stood rooted to the floor trying to organize his chaotic thoughts. What did this mean? What was she trying to do to him? He was standing in full view and she not only chose to ignore him but to conduct herself in a scandalous manner.

As she passed from view into the bedroom, Stan bolted after her, calling, "Mitzi! Mitzi! You've carried this thing far enough! Let's—"

She had been moving toward the bathroom door and as he spoke, she stopped suddenly and whirled around and looked at him through wide eyes. "What on earth!" she whispered.

"It's Stan, Mitzi! For heaven's sake—!" Then he stopped with a chill running up his back as he realized she was not looking *at* him at all, but *through* him. The direct gaze had been mere coincidence because now her eyes drifted away from where he stood. He saw her shiver slightly, then turn and go into the bathroom, closing the door after her.

He stood again, irresolute, trying to fathom this madness. He was here, in Mitzi's apartment and she could not see him. When had he come? And why? To settle the quarrel? Of course. But when? He

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could not remember entering —ringing the bell—waiting for Mitzi to answer.

But that didn't seem important. He was *there* and Mitzi had acted as though she were alone. In sudden desperation, he rushed to the bathroom door calling "Mitzi! Mitzi! For God's sake! Listen to me!" In desperation, he raised his fist to beat on the door.

But he beat upon nothing. His fist hit nothing. It was as though the door, though clear and solid before his eyes, did not exist. His fist went right through, pulling him off-balance and causing him to stumble forward after it.

Then he was standing in the bathroom—inside the closed door—with Mitzi.

She was just turning from looking into the mirror over the wash basin and now she reached over the bath tub to turn on the shower. As Stan stood dazed, the water sluiced down from the shower nozzle and Mitzi pulled the curtains around it to keep the floor from being splashed. She reached in through the curtains to make a final adjustment of the temperature and then turned away from the tub.

Stan's eyes went wide. *Why, she's going—* The thought screamed through Stan's mind, but he was helpless to move, as Mitzi bent down lithely, caught the hem of her gown and pulled it over her head in a single graceful motion.

The sound of his pounding heart roared through Stan's ears and his whole body shook with a sudden weakness. Mitzi stepped to the mirrored cabinet and stood on her toes as she took a shower cap from the cabinet. She leaned backward at the waist as she tightened her hair into a bun on the back of her head and pulled on the shower cap.

Stan opened his mouth, gulping for words. No words came. Mitzi gave the cap a final pat and stepped gracefully into the shower.

She was again beyond his sight and it was as though Stan had been released from a spell. He took two rapid steps backward and the door was again there—seemingly solid and impregnable—between him and the interior of the bathroom.

His face flamed and the self-condemnation within him was almost akin to a physical sickness. How low could a man drop? Spying on an suspecting girl in her own bathroom! That was the sort of thing that sent peepers into cells

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for long stretches. But when it was practically thrust upon you, when a girl like Mitzi was suddenly in range of your eyes before you realized what was happening—

Stan turned away miserably. Then he realized he'd been standing there longer than he'd thought, because the bathroom door opened and Mitzi came out looking like a fresh pink rosebud. She was drying herself with a bright green towel.

But her movements were vague, the action overshadowed by the thoughtful expression on her beautiful face. She moved past Stan, into the living room and walked to the telephone and stood there for a long moment, pondering over something.

Then she bent with quick decision, lifted the receiver and began dialing . . .

The sound of a ringing phone seemed to act as a brisk breeze, driving away the violet clouds to leave Stan suspended in blank space. Then the living room of his own apartment formed around him. He was sitting motionless on a straight-backed chair with the tips of his fingers touching together and he had been there for a long time, because it was morning and the daylight was flooding through the window.

His body felt numb, almost as though he had no body, as though he were nothing more than a glowing, powerful mind suspended in space. The phone went on with its insistent ringing. Stan got to his feet and it was like a brake being thrown on. Suddenly he had a body again—a dead weight he had to lug around with him; a cell in which he was imprisoned.

Now too, he was conscious of a dull, nagging headache. The phone began seemingly sharp in its demand to be answered. Stan walked stiffly across and lifted the receiver. "Hello."

"Hello—Stan? This is—"

"I know. Hello, Mitzi."

There was a pause, a small, uncertain laugh. "I—I suppose you're wondering why I'm calling so early—"

"Mitzi, I'm sorry—"

"So am I, darling. I guess the fight we had really upset me. I—this morning—"

"Yes?"

"I woke up and thought I heard you in the living room. It was the weirdest thing."

"Do you feel all right now?"

"I wasn't sick, if that's what you mean. Just my nerves, I guess."

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Stan stood staring at the wall with misery in his eyes. "Angel, it wasn't what you think at all. Your nerves are all right. I'm the one that's off-beam. Something—something terrible has happened."

"What's happened, Stan?"

"Last night, after I met you, I went to—well, a kind of meeting."

"I don't understand, darling. What—?"

"Mitzi! I *was* in your apartment this morning. I *did* speak to you!"

"Stan! That's absurd! How could you have been here without my seeing you?"

"You heard me didn't you?"

"That was my imagination."

"Do you think so? Then listen to this. When you heard my voice, you came from your bedroom into the living room and looked out into the hall."

"That's just a wild guess on your part."

"You were starting back to bed. Then you looked at the clock and decided to stay up. You went into the bathroom and took a shower."

There was a long pause after which Mitzi said, "Wait a minute—what was I wearing?"

"A—a pink nightgown."

"Just what kind?"

"A very short one. It came hardly to your—"

There was a sharp gasp at the other end of the line and Stan said, "Mitzi—please—please let me explain—tell you—it wasn't my fault—I—"

The receiver at the other end snapped down and Stan cradled his. He sank to the very bottom so far as his spirits were concerned.

He got dressed from force of habit and arrived at the office at nine as usual. It looked extraordinarily bleak today, as Stan's failure to get the promotion came sharply into his mind. He hung up his hat and coat and went to his desk in the bull pen. He checked his receiving tray to see what accounts he was scheduled to write copy for; which articles or commodities he was scheduled to make glamorous and attractive for prospective buyers. There was a new tie clasp, Dandee Corporation had put out. Ugly looking thing. As he stared at the picture, his phone rang.

It was Sam Colter, the big wheel himself calling Stan into his private office.

Colter got right down to cases. "I'm not apologizing for giving Wilkerson the promotion, Stan. I think he was slightly the best man and I

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still do, but the job's yours if you want it."

"I—I don't understand, Mr. Colter."

"Wilkerson and I—" Colter was embarrassed, possibly at being revealed as an executive who couldn't control his help. "Well, we had a difference of opinion as to what the job was worth. He wanted fifty a week more than I was willing to pay—to start, that is—so one word led to another and now Wilkerson isn't with us any more."

"I—I don't know what to say."

"Do you want the job?"

"Of course."

"At my terms?"

"I always thought they were generous."

"Then go on out and take over. And good luck . . ."

An hour later, established in the private office, Stan sat staring into space. This was impossible! The promotion! The office, the desk, the chair, just as he'd visualized it! There was the corner upon which Mitzi had sat in the nude!

The thought was like a dash of ice water bringing him back to reality. After all! How big a fool could a man be? Wilkerson and Colter couldn't agree, that was all that had happened. In fact, Stan remembered Wilkerson saying privately that the job had better pay good money; that he and the Old Man would have a talk about that. They'd had the talk and Wilkerson was out and Stan had been the next man in line. As simple as that. Nothing to thank that Abat Singh phoney for. In fact, Singh had taken him for five hundred bucks. Made a sucker out of him. Also, his nerves had been roiled up to the point of his having bad dreams.

He leaned back in his chair. Bad dreams? Well, not exactly bad. He smiled dreamily, wondering if Mitzi really looked like that. If—

The phone rang. He picked it up and gave his name importantly. He was an executive now.

The voice at the other end was sharp and businesslike. "Are you the Stanley Kingston who wrote a short story called 'Night And The Riptide'?"

Stan did a mental double take. Good Lord! This must be a voice out of the past. It had been all of five years since he'd gone on that fiction binge; had got himself confused with someone who had talent and had written six or

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seven short stories and started them on the rounds.

They'd bounced back with a regularity that fast dissuaded him of any belief in his ability along those lines. All except one. That Riptide thing, he remembered, had finally been taken by one of the little magazines with high hopes and no money. They'd paid him twenty-five dollars on publication and he'd had a night on the town and that had been that. Now, here was someone asking . . .

"Mr. Kingston?"

"Yes—yes. I was just trying to remember. It's been so long."

"My name is Caldwell. I'm a literary agent. A publisher I know is putting an anthology together and came upon your story. I've spent the last month trying to locate you. They want Riptide and are willing to pay you five hundred dollars."

"It's theirs," Stan said weakly.

"That's only for anthology rights of course."

"It's still theirs."

"Fine. There will be a check in the mail tomorrow. Your endorsement will constitute a contract. Thank you and good day."

Dazed, Stan cradled the phone. This was incredible! Miraculous! Joyce Hager had said the five hundred would come quickly. *And she'd said there would be plenty more.* The exhilaration Stan had felt in that dirty hall came sweeping back over him. Power! The power to get anything he wanted! Anything a man desires . . .

He snatched up the phone book and leafed through until he found a Joyce Hager at the address he'd visited the previous night. The phone rang three times, then Joyce Hager's rich voice answered.

"This is Stanley Kingston."

"Hello, Stan. How's the promotion?"

"The promotion? Why, fine, but how did you—?"

"How did I know you had it? You *had* to get it. You concentrated, didn't you? You used your mental powers." She spoke as though anyone doubting it couldn't possibly be in their right mind."

"I—I got something else, too."

"The five hundred?"

"Yes. Why, you're—you're uncanny!"

"No. That was the other item you wanted. It followed you would get it, but I'd hoped not quite so soon."

"Why?"

"Can't you guess?"

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"No—I'm afraid I can't."

"Well, let's just say I like having you under obligation to me. Now you'll pay the money back and I'll lose my hold on you." Her laugh was warming—like liquid sunshine.

Stan said, "Listen—I want to talk to you. Could I come over, say—"

"Any time you wish."

"Thank you."

"Why not now?"

Why not indeed? He was an executive. Key men were not questioned as to their comings and goings. "Twenty minutes," he said.

"I'll be waiting."

Stan walked out past the receptionist's desk. He said, "I'm going out. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

She looked at him respectfully. "Of course, Mr. Kingston."

Ah, power!

Joyce Hager was clad in a fetching negligee when Stan arrived. She made martinis and they sat on the lounge by the window overlooking the bay.

Stan said, "Joyce, I'm—well, I'm pretty confused."

She laughed. "It is hard to get used to, isn't it?"

"How long have you been this way—I mean, how long have you taken lessons from Doctor Singh?"

"Only three months."

"If it's not too personal, where did your money come from?"

"The money? Oh, that came from an old, worthless piece of land my father left me. Suddenly, a week after my first lesson with Singh, it became very valuable. Oil. In a place oil had never been heard of. Opened up a whole new field."

"And you think that wouldn't have happened if you hadn't concentrated."

"I know it wouldn't."

"How can you be sure?"

"I don't think it's necessary, really, to be sure. A lot can be taken on faith."

The word *faith* disturbed Stan—jarred him. It had the sound of religion, and there was certainly nothing religious about this deal. As a matter of fact it seemed more to him like the opposite. His first instinct had been to consider it some sort of undetectable thievery. Now, he wasn't sure.

"Besides," Joyce was saying, "there are other things that prove the worth of this method. Things you'll find out later. Soon, you'll begin developing amazing powers."

"Perhaps I have already.

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I—" he stopped and glanced at her. "Would it shock you if I spoke frankly?"

"Not at all." Then the smile left her face and she arose from the lounge. "But will you wait just a moment?"

"Of course."

She left the room to return shortly, smiling again. "Ah, that will be better. Much better."

"Don't you feel well?"

"Nothing. Just a nagging headache. It comes and goes." She sat down again. "You were saying—?"

"After I got home last night, I tried concentrating by myself."

"What did you concentrate on?"

"The promotion. I had a rather hard time holding the image but it finally came. Then the color changed to violet and I was in my fiancee's apartment. She didn't know I was there."

Joyce Hager's liquid laugh cut in. "You're blushing. That's nice. So few men blush these days. I can tell something happened while you were there."

"She—she had on a rather brief nightgown. She didn't know I was there and she took it off."

Joyce Hager's eyelids lowered languidly. "And there was something else you forgot to tell me—a voice."

"Oh, yes. It was your voice, calling me. But how did you know?"

"Who would know better?"

"You mean it actually *was* your voice?"

In answer, she moved suddenly close to him, put her arms around him and drew him down. Her lips went hot against his; her whole body seemed to be flowing into his. He had never before felt such a kiss as this. The room whirled around him and he drew back instinctively.

She released him with that same enigmatic smile. "I was speaking of power you will develop when you give your brain a chance to really function. Let me enlighten you a little. Last night, when you sat down beside me, you'll remember I appeared to have some delightful secret of my own. You couldn't have helped noticing it."

"I did notice it."

"Well, the perception you achieved that enabled you to stand unseen in your sweetheart's apartment, is only one facet of the development. It was a result of lack of control. When you concentrated on the promotion as what you wanted more than anything

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else, your subconscious gave you what you really wanted."

"You mean, Mitzi stripped—" Stan blurted. He turned scarlet.

"Of course. What is any man's basic instinct concerning the woman he loves?"

"That's—that's pretty elemental—"

"We're dealing in elementals. As I was saying, there are other facets. I've developed one. The ability to strip away non-essentials so to speak. To see through the protective devices."

For a moment he couldn't fathom what she was really saying. Then it dawned on him. "You mean you—you can, well, take people's clothes off with your eyes? Look right through cloth? Through everything they're—?"

"Through everything else, too."

"Then when I sat there beside you—you were really looking at me without my—" The shock and the shame of it choked off his words.

"Why do you think I went to Abat Singh for you?"

The memory of standing—or rather sitting—there completely revealed to her, burned in him, shocked him to the core. A person's basic reactions bared to—" He dug hastily in his pocket. "Here's the money I owe you," he said hurriedly. "Now I must go."

She arose with him and followed him to the door. "You'll come back soon?" Her eyes were laughing. He wasn't sure whether they were laughing with him or at him.

"I—I'm afraid I'll be pretty busy."

"There's another meeting at the hall next Friday night. I'm sure you won't want to miss that."

He thought it over. "No—no. I won't want to miss it."

"I'm glad." She moved close and looked up into his eyes intimately. "We shouldn't lose each other. Remember—we have a secret all our own."

He rushed out into the street.

When he got home that evening, he felt better. His self-confidence had returned. The tangibility of the promotion, the tingle of anticipation at future possibilities, the heady feeling of success, all joined to put things in their proper perspective. After all, he decided, the carnal aspects of this thing were secondary. The important point was what could be achieved in the way of financial success. A short-cut to wealth.

Or was it a shortcut? Perhaps it was the natural way

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and all other grubbing, plodding methods were wrong. He was willing to admit that as he looked forward to unlimited success.

He hadn't been home for more than a few minutes that evening when the doorbell rang. He opened the door and found Mitzi. She came in and kissed him quickly and looked closely into his eyes. "Darling, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me!"

He was genuinely mystified. "Forgive you what?"

"Hanging up on you this morning when you're in so much trouble!"

"That's all right. Besides, I'm not in any trouble. What gave you that idea?"

It was her turn to be mystified. "Why, on the phone this morning, darling. You said something terrible had happened. You wanted to explain—"

"It was nothing. I'm always grouchy in the morning." He took her in his arms and kissed her and tried to smile it off, but after the kiss she drew back and turned serious and said, "It was something, Stan. Tell me. I want to know."

He turned away and thought swiftly as he moved toward the window. She followed. As she laid a hand on his shoulder he turned and said, "Sit down, angel. Something wonderful's come our way. First, I got the promotion."

"But I thought—"

"Wilkerson struck out. The Old Man told me this morning."

"That's wonderful, Stan. Wonderful, but that other thing—what you were talking about this morning on the phone—"

"It was nothing, nothing at all. We—"

Mitzi put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him into a chair. "Stan. You aren't fooling me. I know you too well. You're hiding something."

"What makes you say that? I'm acting no differently than I always act."

"That's not true. There's something—something feverish about you. Tell me—please."

Stan got up and walked to the window and stood looking out. She left him alone for a long moment—until silence shrieked through the room. Then he turned and led her to the lounge and sat down beside her. "All right. I'll tell you the whole story, darling. I guess you've got a right to know . . ."

After he stopped talking,

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Mitzi sat for a while in silence, staring into his face. Then she turned away, a little miserably, he thought. A slight shiver went through her. "I think it's monstrous!" she said.

He was thunderstruck. "But Mitzi! You don't understand. It means a fortune for us! We'll have no financial worries for the rest of our lives. We can live!"

"Can we?"

"Why not?"

"I—I don't know why not. I just know there's something horrible about this whole thing." She leaned forward and laid a quick hand on his. "Stan—why are you so certain that it isn't a tremendous fraud—a trap for gullible fools?"

"That's insane—look at the results I've got already?"

"All right. Let's look at them. You got a promotion you didn't expect, but what connection was there between Wilkerson not satisfying your employer and your crazy mental business? Such things have happened before."

"But—"

"All right, the five-hundred dollars. Let's look at that. The man said he'd been trying to find you for quite a while. That means he wanted the story long before you ever met the horrible Singh person. Can't you see it was sheer coincidence?"

He saw that arguing with her would be a waste of time and he searched his mind looking for some sort of compromise.

"So far as I can see," Mitzi said, "all you got out of this was a dirty nightmare of some kind. I tell you, darling—it's evil!"

"All right, Mitzi, I won't argue the point. Maybe it was all coincidence, but how do you explain those other people—the other clients of Abat Singh. They're getting something out of it—getting a lot—or they wouldn't be there."

"I don't care about them. I'm not interested. I'm only interested in you—in us—"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Stan said slowly. "We'll keep an open mind—even a cynical mind—until we find out one way or another. We've *got* to find out, darling. We can't just walk away from this until we know for sure. There's another meeting soon. We'll go together. You can see for yourself."

She knew it was the best she could get. So she agreed. They went out to dinner and every time his mind turned toward the thing she hated instinctively, she steered him

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away from it. She also spent the evening trying to quiet her own formless fears.

As he was dropping her off at her apartment, he said, "May I come in for a moment?"

She glanced at him with concern. "Why, what a question! You can come in any time you want to. You know that."

"It's my head. A kind of dull ache. I need a couple of aspirins."

Stan arrived at the office at around ten o'clock the next morning. The girl at the reception desk said, "There was a man to see you, sir. A Mr. Jandore. He said he'd get in touch with you later."

"Jandore? What did he look like?"

"A foreign gentleman. Tall. Very dark. An Indian I think."

Stan went into his office frowning. "I wonder who he could have been?"

He arrived home that evening to find a small white card that had been pushed under the door:

Mr. Kingston:
It is imperative that I see you as soon as possible. Will you call me at Lakeside 6-9655? I will be very grateful and I am sure you will profit.
Ludan Jandore.

Stan went in and called the number. The phone rang interminably. There was no answer and he finally hung up.

Two days later, a note was delivered to Stan's office.

Mr. Kingston:
It is unfortunate that we have not been able to make contact. There have been others in greater peril than yourself and I have had to allocate my time wisely. I hope you will be at the Kali meeting on Friday night. It is important.
Ludan Jandore.

What in the name of common sense can he want? Stan wondered. But he did not give it too much thought because he'd been busy with other things. He'd been concentrating each night and his feeling of self confidence and well being had increased. It would be merely a matter of time before he got a partnership in the firm. Then . . .

He had been looking forward to Friday night, and as he led Mitzi up the rickety stairs, he felt a thrill of an-

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ticipation. One or two more lifts from Abat Singh and he would be able to achieve complete power on his own.

Mitzi shivered as they entered the hall. "What a grim place! You must be out of your mind, Stan, to think anyone in this sort of a hole could help you."

"I've told you the reason for that, angel. When you find a good thing, you don't go out and tell the world. By the way, have you any aspirin with you?"

"That headache again?"

"It's not bad. Just a dull, nagging ache."

They sat down and Stan kept glancing at the door, waiting for the arrival of Joyce Hager. But Joyce did not make an appearance. In fact, no one made an appearance except one of the men Stan had seen at the previous meeting. The man entered, a little nervously, Stan thought, and took a seat at the far side of the hall.

A few minutes passed, and another man entered the hall —a tall, dark-skinned individual wearing a turban and a dark conservative business suit.

Stan indicated with his head and whispered, "That must be him—the Indian who's been leaving notes for me." He half-rose, preparatory to approaching the man, but at that moment, the door to the cubicle opened and Abat Singh made his appearance.

Singh stopped short at seeing only four persons in the hall. He seemed on the point of approaching the dark man also, but changed his mind and strode forward toward the platform.

After that, things happened quickly. Abat Singh stood for a moment looking out across the seats. He appeared to be about to speak. Then a strange look of pain and bewilderment came over his heavy face. He lifted his hands to his head and stood for a moment as though under some great shock.

Then he pitched forward on his face.

Stan sprang to his feet; but when he ran forward, it was to follow the tall dark man who was already kneeling beside the fallen instructor. The man looked up as Stan and the other student approached. "Quick! We must get him into his office."

They lifted Abat Singh and carried him into the little glass cubicle where they laid him on the desk. As they did so, Stan said, "Are you Ludan

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Jandore? The man who has been trying to contact me?"

"Yes, but that isn't important now. I must make a phone call." He snatched up the phone and dialed a number. A moment later, he was saying, "This is Ludan. It has happened. Come quickly. If you hurry, we may be able to save his life."

He hung up and bent over to examine the unconscious Singh. He peered into the man's eyes with the aid of a small flashlight and tested him in various ways for reaction.

Stan said, "Wouldn't it be better to call the fire department for emergency first aid. They would get him to a hospital."

"Your local doctors would be unable to help him," Jandore said. "His illness lies far deeper than they are able to go."

It seemed strange to Stan, later, that neither he nor the other student questioned Jandore's decision. It seemed that the man had a quiet power that was unassailable. In a remarkably short time, four turbanned men appeared. They said nothing but they acted with unity and precision and carried Abat Singh away.

After the outer door had closed, Ludan Jandore, turned to the other student whose name Stan did not know. A look of understanding passed between them. The student appeared visibly shaken as Jandore said, "Now do you believe?"

"I'm afraid I do."

"Then go home and forget this terrible thing."

As the student walked out Jandore appeared to forget him. He took a small notebook from his pocket and said, "There was one student I was not able to locate. I expected to find her here tonight."

"Do you mean Joyce Hager?"

"Yes, and the fact that she is not here bothers me. Could you help me—?"

"I know where she lives."

"Then let's go there without loss of time, my friend."

Nothing was said in the cab. Jandore appeared to be occupied with grave thoughts. Stan felt the presence of a nameless fear in his heart, and Mitzi sat in silence, gripping his hand.

They rang the bell of Joyce's apartment but got no response. Jandore put his ear to the door and listened. "Someone is in there," he said. "I hear breathing."

Stan thought he must have had remarkably sharp ears to hear breathing through a

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thick door but did not refer to this. "Do you think we ought to call the manager of the building?"

"It might be difficult to locate him. I wonder if the young lady has a nail file?"

Mitzi produced one and Jandore slid it into the crack and snapped back the catch. He pushed the door open and they entered the apartment.

It was dark and as they moved through the living room they heard the sound of faint, chuckling laughter. "The bedroom," Mitzi whispered.

They moved toward the sound, through a doorway, and Jandore snapped on a light after feeling about on the wall near the door.

The sight presented was one Stan would remember forever. Joyce was on the bed. She was naked, seated in an obscene, cross-legged posture playing with her fingers after the manner of a newborn infant. There was a horrible, vacant grin on her face and as the light went on, her chuckling laughter turned into an unintelligible gibbering that made Stan's hair stand on end.

"Good heavens!" Mitzi murmured. "She's—she's completely insane!"

Jandore's face was filled with sadness. "We are too late. I feared this, but I was even more afraid we would find her dead."

Stan stared in sick fascination at the once beautiful eyes, the twinkling lights within them now turned to grinning emptiness. "What can we do?" he asked. "We've got to do something."

Jandore shook his head. "I can do nothing in this case that your own modern science cannot do just as well or better. We'll call the authorities and report the address. Then we will leave. So long as we cannot help, we are not obligated to remain or identify ourselves . . ."

An hour later, in Stan's apartment, Jandore finished a quick examination and said, "You have not got far enough into it to be injured. If you turn your mind away, to healthy things, there will be no ill-effects."

"But you haven't explained," Mitzi said.

Jandore smiled. "There has hardly been time until now. You see, there is an ancient and honorable school of human advancement that has been on this earth for thousands of years. Various phases of it are known by various names. You have no

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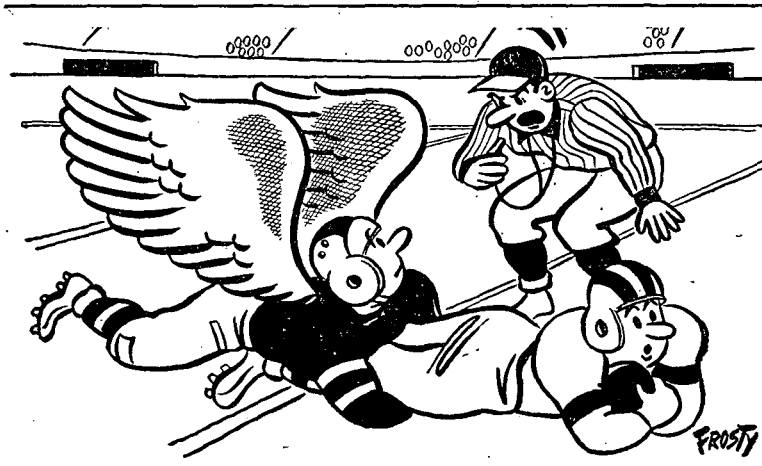
doubt heard the term Yoga, a system practiced mainly in India.

"Yoga is a life study, a routine of mental and physical discipline that has produced men who can perform seeming miracles because they have learned to exercise control over themselves and certain natural laws. But they are men of complete worldly detachment who seek only personal purity and try to help their fellow man.

"There are mental and physical exercises involved that are deadly and dangerous when used in the wrong manner. The man who called himself Abat Singh, was a strong-minded adventurer who found his way into an eastern holy man's cult and devised what you might call a shortcut from the things they taught him in good faith. We have ways of discovering when great truths such as were taught him are put to base uses, and so I was delegated to follow Kendall—that was his real name—and keep him from inflicting injury on others."

"What will you do to him?" Stan asked.

"We will try to save his life first of all, and his sanity. Then we will do our best to guide him along more enlightened paths. You may be sure we will not abandon him because when we imparted to him the first grain of learning relative to these mighty prac-



"You know the flying tackle's illegal!"

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tices, we took on an obligation as to his personal welfare. By restoring him to his former strength we will remain true to ourselves and our philosophies."

"What about Joyce Hager —the injustice he did her—?"

"That is a mark on his soul that will have to be cleansed away speck by speck. Before he is again made whole, he will have answered for it a hundredfold. Such is the law of salvation."

Mitzi had said little. Now she spoke up. "Then the things Stan told you about—the things that happened to him—the promotion and the five hundred dollars—they weren't just coincidence and —and a nightmare?"

Jandore smiled. "The whole mad affair was certainly a nightmare, but the individual facets—one can hardly say. The promotion may have been coincidence or perhaps not. But of one thing, you can be sure. There is no quick road, mental or physical, to the fulfillment of desires. You saw what happened to Joyce Hager and to Kendall when they thought they'd found one. So forget you ever tried to do this mad thing and use your faculties as your instincts tell you to. Work and pray and fear your God and all will surely be well with you."

Stan was still fascinated. "But at least Singh proved these powers exist. Power beyond anything—"

"Men have known that for thousands of years, but they are dangerous powers."

"But that *can* be used."

"Of course. If you feel in the mood to foreswear all the comforts your western civilization affords—forget marriage, home, loved ones—then come to India with me and sit at the feet of the Masters. In ten years you may gain your first faint glimpse of the path that leads toward the goal. In fifty years you will have put your feet on that path."

"Fifty years—!"

"Yes, and in some future lifetime you may earn a spoonful of the glory God reserves for those who are willing to give everything else in return."

Stan rubbed his chin. "A little rough isn't it?"

"You have no idea how rough, so I suggest you seek your salvation here in this great land. Good-bye.

He was gone and they sat in silence, for a long time. And they felt a trifle lonely, because it was as if a great presence had departed, leaving an emptiness.

THE END

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"Madam, I Have Here—"

By IVAR JORGENSEN

Each of us, at one time or another, has dreamed of being hailed as a benefactor to Mankind. If you were able to invent something, say, that would remove the fear of war. That should do it!

You think so? Well, meet Henry Tolliver. He came up with precisely that kind of product. And what was the result? He found only one customer: a cute young widow who was in the market for just one thing: the oldest discovery of them all!

HENRY TOLLIVER had been a plump solemn-faced child with an instinct for salesmanship. When he was five, he took his mother's ten-dollar compact down the street and sold it to a neighbor for a quarter. The neighbor brought it back and Henry got his first and only spanking, but it did not extinguish his urge to sell someone something. He was just more careful in the future about working so close to home.

He went to high school and —because his father wished it — majored in chemistry when he reached college age. He didn't particularly care for chemistry, but he didn't want to hurt his father's feelings. He graduated and his father arranged to have him start in the laboratory of a big oil company. But on the evening of the first day, Henry arrived home carrying a small black suitcase.

His father eyed it with interest and said, "Hmmm—home work already? Valuable formulas, maybe. I'm proud of you, son."

Henry shook his head. "No formulas."

"What then?"

"Brushes."

"Brushes? What for?"

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"This is something," Henry said, "that you can't live without!"

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"To sell, Father."

"Good lord! You mean the oil company sent you out to sell brushes?"

"No, Father. I didn't go to the oil company this morning. I went to a brush company and got a job selling brushes to housewives."

His father was aghast. "Have you gone crazy?"

"No. I don't think so, at least. I just like to sell things door-to-door. That's how it is in life, Father. Some people like to build bridges, some like to run for president, some like to work for oil companies. I just happen to like selling from door to door."

Henry's father died shortly thereafter—possibly from the shock, although the doctor diagnosed his trouble as a virus condition. So, as Henry's mother had died when he was ten and he had no close relatives, he was suddenly quite alone in the world.

This saddened him for a time, but he got over it and bought a small bungalow in the suburbs. He never married, staying quite happy with his work and his hobby. The work consisted of calling, daily, on fifty housewives, rain or shine, and offering them his line of brushes. To Henry, this was the ultimate in salesmanship; possibly because at the age of five he had sold a compact to a lady at her back door and as the twig is bent, so grows the door-to-door salesman.

His hobby was that which his father had planned for him as a career. Chemistry. And it was probably in his sire's memory that Henry set up the small laboratory in his basement.

So, withall, he led a contented life: selling in the daytime, and puttering in his laboratory at night. Only one thing disturbed Henry.

The news.

He listened to the news every night while eating his supper. All they seemed to talk about was bombs. First there was the atom bomb that could blow a city to bits. Then came the hydrogen bomb that could take several cities and the land they stood on in one pop. This became passé, however, when a group of scientists got together and assembled the tritium bomb. The specialty of this monster was knocking small continents clean off the globe. Absolutely the greatest, it seemed.

But no. The tritium bomb blushed in its lead-lined case when they came along with the helio-iridium bomb. This

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was absolutely it and no fooling. It's talent was denuding small planets of all life except certain tenacious germ-forms, *Homo Sapiens* not being one of these. And its inventors owlishly stated that a helio-iridium could be produced in a size calculated to do the same for large planets.

This bothered Henry because he loved life and had no stomach for complete obliteration. Certainly, he thought, there must be a preventative. There was an antidote for almost everything: snakebite, measles, athlete's foot. Why not for the helio-iridium bomb?

With this thought in mind, he began spending longer hours in his laboratory. One night, he worked until after dawn and had just time to shave and get out on his route by eight-thirty. Bomb or no bomb, he always got on his route at eight-thirty and was going to continue to do so.

But each night he worked dutifully, seeking something —anything—that would keep men alive during a helio-iridium bombing, because he was convinced a bombing there would be.

He reasoned that when the first cave man found a rock could be thrown at an enemy, he up and heaved it. When the bow and arrow was invented, the boys used it and fast. And gunpowder! It was generally conceded that the stuff would wipe out civilization, and they were up mighty early in the morning to give it a try.

So Henry wasn't fooled about the helio-iridium bomb at all. Beyond all doubt, somebody was going to throw it at somebody else and hope for the best. So he worked on an antidote.

And he found it. Late one night he stirred four concoctions together, added a few dregs of this and that he had lying around and then analyzed the result. He'd hit the jackpot! This he knew, but even so, he spent a week testing it. It stood up. He was in.

The next day, he sold brushes as usual, returning home to find that the bottles he'd ordered had been delivered. He spent the night bottling his product—which he named Prevento—and started out the next morning with a case full of bottles.

He knocked at the door of the first house and smiled at the lady who answered. He said, "Good morning, Madam. I have here a product you absolutely cannot do without."

He held up the bottle and

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the lady frowned at it. "What is the stuff?"

"I call it Prevento, Madam."

"What does it prevent?"

"It saves you from death and destruction from the helio bomb. You simply spray it on the outside of your house and when the bomb is dropped, I guarantee it will have no effect on either yourself or your property. Prevento renders house, home, and occupants completely impervious to destruction."

"Will it take yellow stains off washbowls?"

"I'm afraid not, Madam. You see—"

"Well, the only thing I need at the moment is something to take the stain out of my washbowls. It's this hard water we have here. Good day."

"But Madam—"

The door was closed. Henry, who had seen doors shut before, closed his case and moved on down the block. At the next house, he was greeted by a huge man in his undershirt with suspenders hanging down behind. The man had been gotten out of bed and gruffly inquired, "What d'ya want?"

Henry went into the patter and told the man what Prevento would do. The man's jaw dropped and hung down a while, after which, he got up and said, "Well I'll be a lop-eared slob!"

"It's a product that should be in every home, sir."

"Well, I'll be a bow-legged Eskimo!"

"When death and destruction start raining down—"

"I'll be a splay-footed flea trainer!"

"No doubt, but—"

"Get out o' here you cheap little racketeer. I've heard o' grifts and come-ons, but this one wins. Beat it! I'd call the cops, but it ain't necessary. Keep roaming around with that gimmick and you'll be in the jug by two o'clock."

Back on the sidewalk, Henry was slightly shaken. He was used to rebuffs, but he had never before been called a crook. Perhaps it had been something he'd said unknowingly; some exaggerated promise he'd made relative to the product. He walked down the street recalling his words and going over them carefully. No, he'd said nothing to mislead the man in any way. Perhaps the fellow had been grumpy from having to get out of bed.

Henry went on canvassing, but made no sales. And as time passed, he wondered if

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his sales talk was losing its old punch and enthusiasm. People were reacting all wrong. They hardly allowed him to get into his talk before they banged doors in his face. And some of them laughed.

Some remained kind, however. There was the old gentleman who said, "Young man, you're going at it all wrong. With a product of this kind, you should contact the government. They have scientists who would test your product and report on it to the people."

The man spoke with amusement and had no seeming intention of buying any Prevento, but Henry was thankful for his courtesy on what had turned out to be a very discourteous day. Henry said, "But, sir, I've already tested Prevento. There's no need for the government experts to cover the same ground over again. And Prevento is for the people; that's why I'm bringing it to them direct. I've been a door-to-door salesman all my life, and believe me, it's the most direct method of salesmanship there is."

"I don't doubt it," the man said, "but I'm sure you'll excuse me. I have a chess problem to work out."

"And you don't want a bottle of Prevento?"

"Will it work out chess problems?"

"No, it—"

"Then I'm afraid not. Good day."

Henry's spirits were drooping. Never in his door-to-door career had he gone this far into a day without a sale. He was astounded that people cared so little for their future safety. Prevento should be going like hot cakes, and here— He felt a touch of panic. What if he went all day without a single, solitary sale? This was the nightmare of all door-to-door men and now he was facing it. *No sale all day.*

But Henry was saved from this ignomy. He'd swung around the whole territory and was on the way home and decided—just a block from his bungalow—to have one more try at it. He turned in at a small white house and rang the bell.

A woman answered; a plump, pretty woman about his own age. She smiled. "Yes?"

"I have here a product, Madam, that no home should be without."

"That's nice. Won't you come in?"

She insisted he sit down in a comfortable living room

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chair where he went on with his sales pitch. "This is a product that will protect you and your home from atomic destruction, Madam."

"That's very nice. By the way, aren't you the Mr. Tolliver who lives down the street? The single Mr. Tolliver?"

"That's right, Madam. Now Prevento—"

"What a coincidence. I'm Helen Jessup. *Widow* Jessup, you might say." She blushed. "Or rather, you *should* say. My dear husband died two years ago."

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Jessup. Now my product, Prevento—"

"Pardon me just a moment, dear Mr. Tolliver, while I make us a cup of tea."

Henry was grateful indeed. He could certainly use a cup of tea. And Mrs. Jessup was such a kind, thoughtful woman. How was it that some people were so unkind and then you met someone like Mrs. Jessup who, for no reason whatever, was just the other way?

She brought the tea and some cookies also — she'd made them herself. Henry enjoyed a pleasant interlude.

But finally it grew late and he brought up the Prevento again. "I think you're a real genius," Mrs. Jessup said, "to have discovered anything so wonderful. I'll take two bottles. That is, if you'll tell me how I use it."

Henry explained and thanked her and left. He was tired when he got home. Discouraged, too. But perhaps tomorrow would be better. It had to be.

It wasn't. It was worse. Not one single, solitary sale; and with his feet aching, Henry started for home. As he passed the widow Jessup's house, he heard a cheery call from the yard. He looked up and saw Mrs. Jessup at work on the wall of her house with Prevento.

"I'm doing what you told me to, Mr. Tolliver. Or I hope I am. Do you mind stepping in a moment to see if I'm getting it right?"

Henry went in and while he continued with the work of immunizing Mrs. Jessup's house, she made more tea and produced a new plate of cookies.

While they had the lunch, she prattled happily about this and that and Mr. Tolliver answered yes and no when the occasion seemed to demand. His mind kept wandering to his own problems, however, but Mrs. Jessup did not seem to be offended, so the

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interlude was again pleasant for Henry.

He got home and made his supper and did the dishes before he realized he'd missed his news. He went immediately to bed because he wanted to be fresh for the next day's efforts, and turned on the set at his bedside . . .

The announcer was exultant: "—and so, listeners of the radio audience, for the first time in the history of the world, all nations are in complete agreement. Brought into unison by knowledge of the horror a helio-iridium bomb would bring, every nation on the face of the earth has joined in the peace pact. The last signatures were affixed today, and the whole world now joins hands in good-fellowship and understanding. There will be no war! The helio-iridium bomb is outlawed!"

If Henry had been worried before, his anxiety was now two-fold. He went to sleep resolved to be up at the crack of dawn, because if the world ever needed his product, the time was now . . .

"Madam, I have here a bottle of Prevento. My own invention. It will protect—"

"I'm busy."

"Good morning, Madam. Prevento will guard you and your loved ones—"

"I think you're crazy."

"Good morning, Madam..."

"Good-bye!"

Henry dragged himself home that night in a strange mood. He was no longer depressed — doubtful of his ability. No salesman could fall to pieces as completely as he had appeared to. It had to be something else. The people. They just didn't care whether they survived or not. If that was the case, there was nothing he could do.

He went to bed that night and turned on the radio and heard the heads of twelve governments pledge life-long fealty to the principles of peace.

This could be it, he thought as he dozed off.

It was. Just before dawn, Henry was awakened by thundering explosions. He got up and went to the window and saw hell incarnate raging outside. It was the greatest fireworks display ever seen; all the colors of the rainbow flaring across the earth.

He watched until dawn when it died down and then went outside to survey the ruins. But there were no ruins. There was nothing except two cheerful little bunga-

(Concluded on page 61)

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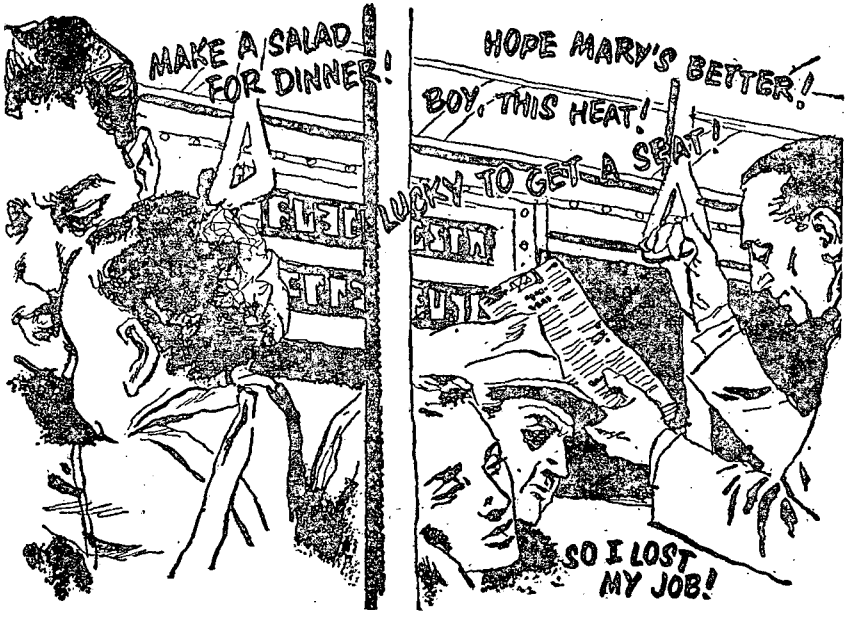
THE MAN WHO READ MINDS

By JOHN TOLAND

The people about you: what are they thinking? The young woman with the lovely figure and the angelic expression—are her thoughts as inviting as the rest of her? And the man in the black Homburg and the Brooks Brothers suit: is he a banker or a burglar?

Now imagine being able to hear the thoughts of others. What would this unique gift bring to you? Happiness and success—or a burden capable of crushing the life from you?



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THE first time it happened, Russell Peters was on the shuttle between Times Square and Grand Central. His mind was in its usual anesthetized subway-blank as he stared sightlessly out the window at the flickering posts. The subway lurched and he took a tighter grip on the strap.

You stupid, long-legged drink of water, get your elbow out of my paper!

Russell, shocked out of his mental cocoon, looked down at the hard-faced, blondined girl sitting below him.

"I . . . I'm sorry," he stammered arching his six-foot-three body away from the girl's *Daily Mirror*.

"Hunh?" The girl looked up at him and sneered, since she was the type that sneered at men.

"I'm sorry I bumped into your paper, miss," he said in a stilted fashion. He wasn't accustomed to talking to strangers.

Oh, brother, you're on all fours, remarked the girl without moving her lips.

"On all fours?" replied Russell perplexedly, making a mental note that this too-blonde girl must be a professional ventriloquist.

Suddenly it dawned on him: he was "hearing" their thoughts!

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Yeah, you're a creep, explained the girl soundlessly, with no lip movement. "WHAT?" she suddenly shouted. "How did you . . ."

At that moment the subway had stopped at Grand Central with its usual jerk and the doors opened. The girl, after a frightened look at the tall blond man, ran past him and out the door.

Come on, big boy, get the lead outa your tail.

Russell turned to see a small high-school student glaring at him impatiently.

Move the carcass, man, I've got a local to catch! growled the boy with immobile lips.

Russell gulped. For at last he realized what had happened. He had become a telepath.

Frightened and yet fascinated, Russell's feet automatically walked down the long, long corridor to the Lexington Line. He kept as far away from the other travelers as possible for when anyone got within several feet of him, he would be bombarded by alien thoughts.

Such phenomena had always interested him and although most of his fellow actuarial experts at United Life scoffed, he had always maintained there were more things on heaven and earth than any of them dreamed of. Automatically he criticized himself for ending a thought with a preposition.

Nice jacket that tall bird's got on. Looks like an English import.

Russell, without thinking, smiled at the good-natured fat man standing next to him on the platform. "No, I got it at Wanamaker's. On the first floor. It *is* English-made but . . ."

The fat man, his eyes as wide as silver dollars, had carefully sidled away from Russell.

He'd have to watch his step, thought the tall man, or he'd be given a free ride to Bellevue. The fear of his new power had dwindled as he became adjusted to the odd feeling. He smiled as he thought of the amusing possibilities that now lay open to him. At last he'd know what old G. B. Fuller, his boss, thought of him. And for the first time he'd find out if Juno. . . .

The smile was erased from his face as he stepped into the downtown local. Juno! Did he really want to know how his well-named, statuesque wife felt about him? He hadn't believed it when she had first accepted his proposal of marriage five years before. How

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could such a beautiful and talented girl be in love with a ridiculous-looking adding-machine like himself?

With mixed emotions, Russell stepped out of the train at 18th Street and slowly headed for the large, green-domed United Life Building. Perhaps his telepathic powers would leave him as suddenly as they came. Perhaps, they had already left him and . . .

Ohhh, it's him! And looking cuter than ever. I wish I could rub my hands through that crew cut of his!

"Good morning, Mr. Peters!" carolled a pleasant, not overbright voice at his side.

Russell looked down to see his tiny secretary, Ginny D'Ambrisio. "Hi, Ginny, you are looking as fresh as a daisy this morning."

Compliments yet! came the thrilled thought from the dark, unattractive girl. *He finally knows I'm a woman!*

"Got a lot of work to get through today," hastily muttered Russell in an impersonal tone. His long legs took even longer steps than usual as he moved away from the girl.

I've offended him! Is it my breath? I know I'm more than half safe. Is he afraid I'll . . .

The frantic, unorganized thoughts were cut off as Russell put distance between him and his secretary. *His* secretary! He smiled wryly. He shared her with six other actuarial computers.

The morning passed very rapidly and he got almost no work done. For he became vicariously interested in the slow-moving romance between Betty, the switchboard girl and Benny, the department's filing clerk; the time-honored hatred between Alice, the chief clerk of the section, and Daisy, the boss's thin private secretary who not only shared Fuller's tiny office in the daytime but also the white-haired man's bedroom at night; and the rivalry among the three junior computers for the senior rating opened by Jonson's recent death.

A typical five minutes in the new thought-life of Russell was spent in the following manner: Russell was at the water-cooler, the nerve center of office politics. Betty, one ear still red from her occupational hazard, slowly approached.

"Hi, Mr. Peters, how's tricks?" she asked. *Tricks! This goop couldn't even. . . . Here he comes! About time too. I just love the way that man half smiles!* "Hi, Benny, what's new?"

The dark, quick-moving Benny smiled at the girl. "New? nothing." *Wuuuuu, if*

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I get any nearer to that water cooler it's going to boil!

The girl smiled. "Well, back to the old grind." *How can I get Benny to make a date?*

Benny gulped his drink. "Yeah, let's hit the ball for dear old United!" *How I'd love to take that number out. But she'd probably laugh at me.*

"Come on, kids, break it up," interrupted the firm but good-natured voice of chief clerk, Alice.

"Mr. Fuller would like to speak to you, Alice," said Daisy darting importantly out of the chief's office. *And on your way in, please drop dead,* added the sweetly smiling private secretary.

"Okay, thanks." Alice smiled at the secretary. *What he sees in a bag of bones like you! Must know where the body is buried, I'll bet!*

The three laughing junior computers joined Russell.

"Hi, Russ, goofing off again, I see," remarked Frendly. *If I had his brains I'd be in charge of this crummy outfit.*

"Guess you guys are sort of anxious about that open senior rating," remarked Russell.

"Doesn't mean a thing to me," said Frendly. *Just my right leg, that's all!*

"Frendly ought to get it. He's got seniority," put in Montrose. *And that's all he's got!*

"Makes no difference to me. I can wait," said the third, Franks. *Probably won't get it. They never judge these things on merit. Those other two jerks have to wear out a slide rule doing what I can figure in my head.*

"Mr. Fuller would like to see you, Russ," said Alice coming briskly to him. *And you'd better batten the hatches, the storms a-coming!*

"He does? Oh, thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for the tip," he said as he pushed his way into Fuller's office.

"Oh, Peters, it's you," growled Fuller looking up from his paper-littered desk. *How am I going to break this to him?*

"Yes, sir?"

"Have a seat." He motioned brusquely towards an uncomfortable chair near the desk. *Sometimes I really hate this lousy job.*

"Was it about the new figures on the 50-55-year-old females?"

Just then, Daisy, green notebook in hand came in the office and, without being told, sat in the chair next to Fuller. *I'm going to enjoy this,* she thought smugly.

"I won't need you for a few

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minutes, Miss Knott," murmured Fuller. *She's getting too darned sure of herself. Coming in and plunking herself down like that!*

"You told me before, Mr. Fuller, you wanted me to make notes on your talk with Peters," said the girl too sweetly. *Who does he think he's talking to? He's going to find out tonight he can't push ME around!*

"Mr. Peters and I are having a private conversation." *I'm going to have to put that girl in her place. Oh, God, why did I ever get so darned involved?*

"Yes, sir," she replied, holding her temper admirably. *You just wait till later, George! You know I wanted to be around when you gave that snooty Peters the sack. The way that tall string bean looks down his aristocratic nose at me! The snob!*

"I'll call you when I want you. Now, Peters," he said clearing his voice after his secretary had left.

"What'd you want to talk about, sir?" asked Peters in a tight voice. This wasn't the best job in the world but it gave Juno and him a nice living.

Fuller glared at him, resenting the tall man for his own moral weakness. "I'm not satisfied with your work, Peters!" *He's the best man I've got. But that little bi——"*

"I'm the best man you've got," interrupted Russell, "but that little bit——"

"Now," blustered Fuller. "Those figures on the 50-55-year-old females. Haywire, my boy!" *Why do I let that skinny kid run my life? If I only hadn't asked her up to my apartment that first time to help with the report on increasing bronchitis in cities of over* 50,000!

"But, sir . . ."

"Haywire, I repeat. I took an awful eating out from upstairs." *Eating out! What a liar I am! The boys upstairs almost broke my back from patting on it.*

"The boys upstairs almost broke your back from patting on it," repeated Russell angrily.

"What'd you say? Why I . . ." *This guy seems to be reading my mind. Unless I'm going nuts!"*

"I *am* reading your mind, sir. And frankly, I'm very disappointed in you." Russell got to his feet as the amazed Fuller stared at him. "I've always admired you, sir, for your spirit of fair play. I even forgave your indiscretions with Miss Knott . . ."

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"How dare you!" *How dare he!*

"Oh, I'm going to get fired so I might as well say what you think."

"You mean, 'say what *you think.*' "

"That's what I said."

"I meant you, you. Not you, me." *I'm getting confused. And my stomach burns.*

"You certainly are getting confused, sir. And if you'd stop eating pie for breakfast your stomach wouldn't burn."

"What kind of trick is this?" *Is this guy on the level? I heard about some man on television . . .*

"I certainly am on the level. And I'm a much better telepath than Dunninger because I can read your mind word for word."

"But I can't—" . . . *believe such things exist!*

"Believe such things exist. I know it's hard, sir. It just happened for the first time this morning. Perhaps one of the atomic explosions in Arizona . . . "

New Mexico, corrected the other automatically.

"Arizona," insisted Russell doggedly, "was the cause of it."

"But if . . ." The white-haired man looked shrewdly at Russell. "Tell me what I'm thinking." *Strawberry shortcake, huckleberry pie, V-I- . . .*"

"C-T-O-R-Y!" finished Russell victoriously.

Around the rough and ragged rock . . .

". . . the ragged rascal ran," interrupted the tall man with no hesitation.

"My good God!" The white-haired man jumped from his chair and grabbed Russell's right hand. "We're going upstairs . . ."

". . . to see the big boys!" finished the ever-correct actuarial expert.

"You said it! This is the biggest thing that ever happened to United since . . . "

". . . the discovery of penicillin!" concluded the tall, blond man.

Miss Knott was almost bowled to the ground when the two men dashed out of the office and ran for the elevator.

Russell was still dazed an hour later as he sat in a half-filled car on the Broadway Express. Fuller had first taken him to the 18th floor where he gave a demonstration of his telepathic powers to B. C. Brennan, third Vice-President. The astounded Brennan had then led Russell to the 20th floor to see Osman P. B. Burke, second Vice-President in charge of United's justly

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famous Weight-Reducing Booklet. Two visits and four floors later, the growing crowd had ended up in the palatial office suite of Fredrick Finke, President and Chairman of the Board.

After Russell had revealed exactly what was on Mr. Finke's busy mind, namely, a) the important merger with Hartford Mutual, b) the bad egg he had eaten that morning, c) his oldest daughter's annoying habit of shaving her legs with his razor, d) the pretty little typist in Adjustment with the amazing mammary development — the excited and somewhat embarrassed Finke called a special meeting of the Board of Directors. At the meeting, attended by a bare quorum, in the steam room of the Yale Club, Finke disclosed he was making Russell a Special Agent at double his old salary and that henceforth the tall man would interview all major claimants to find out if policies should be honored. In addition, Russell would attend the proposed merger meeting the next day and disclose what was actually on the minds of the crafty Hartford Mutual contingent. The dazed telepath was then given the rest of the day off and told to go home and rest himself for the coming meeting.

Russell smiled as he observed his fellow passengers. With a little effort he was now able to probe minds clearly at twenty feet and obscurely at fifty feet. He remembered a story he had once read of a telepath who was driven insane by the evil and bitter thoughts of others (as if others have more evil and bitter thoughts than ourselves). But the experience had quite the opposite effect on him. He found that most people were more attractive since their stupid or wicked actions were rarely motivated by anything but the best intentions. Others were confusing to the tall man at first because of their more complex inner selves. But with a little practice he managed to prune the dozens of minor and fleeting thoughts and reach the crux of personality. For example, the dour-looking young man sitting across the aisle from him appeared unfriendly and arrogant but he was actually only thinking romantically about the pretty, shy girl sitting primly next to him.

Russell discovered in a few moments that the young man had been taking this same train on his lunch hour so he could ride next to the girl. But

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he could never, even after two months, get up his courage to approach her. The girl was also spending all her lunch time on this trip to nowhere, hoping the young man would make the first move.

As Russell got to his feet when the train approached 96th Street, he was impelled by an irresistible impulse to proclaim loudly to the young man, "She wants to meet you."

Then he leaned down and said to the girl, "And *he* wants to meet you but he's afraid to tell you so."

After smiling at both of them benignly, he took the surprised girl's *Daily News* from her and handed the newspaper to the equally astounded young man. The two looked at Russell as though he were crazy. The tall man then ran for the closing door and just made it to the platform. As the train slowly pulled out of the station, he peered in the window and saw the young couple talking with friendly animation.

He was amazed and exhilirated by his sudden lack of fear of strangers. The world had all at once become an intimate arena. He still felt uplifted by his good deed when he quietly opened the door to his tiny but well-kept apartment.

"Who is it?" called a startled contralto.

"It's I, Russell."

"Russell!!" *What in the world is he doing here this time of day? Is he sick? Did he lose his job? Does he suspect me of having a boy friend?* A tall, curvaceous but dignified brunette woman in her early thirties came into the little living room. Her head was tied with a towel and she held a dust mop.

"Surprised?"

"Why, of course!" *And me with my hair in a mess and no makeup.*

"You look very charming, dear." He leaned over and kissed her, as usual, on the cheek.

"What happened?" A montage of horrible possibilities went through his wife's head.

Russell laughed. "Nothing at all like you . . ." He stopped for he had been told by the United officials to keep his new powers a secret. "That is, I've got another job! I'm a Special Agent for the company at double the old salary."

"Oh, Russell!" The statuesque woman, forgetting her usual composure, flung her arms around her husband's neck.

"They gave me the day off. I start the new work tomorrow."

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Juno primly disengaged herself and undid the towel from her head. "It's about time they recognized how good you are. What does a Special Agent do?"

"Oh—just special things," he explained vaguely.

When are you going to give me my stinking sardines?

The startled Russell looked down to see Ilka, their tiger cat, winding in between his wife's well-shaped legs.

Every time you go to the ice-box the phone rings or somebody. . . .

Russell gulped. The message from the animal came in pictures that he had automatically translated into dialogue.

"What's wrong, Russell?"

"Ilka, she's hungry."

"Oh, the poor little dear! Every time I went to feed her today the phone rang or somebody came to the door!" The big woman picked up the complaining cat and cuddled her like a baby. "Did I forgettums baby's itty brekky-wekky?" *Poor hungry-wungry kitty-witty!*

An inspiration suddenly struck the tall man. He grabbed his wife's right hand. "Come on, Juno! Throw on some clothes! We're going to Jamaica!"

"Jamaica? Nobody goes to Jamaica in the summer time!"

"The horse-players do. Hurry up."

"Oh, you mean Long Island. But why on earth . . . " . . . *would an intelligent person like you want to see silly horses running in . . .*

"I've got a hunch we're going to win a lot of money." He looked at his watch. "We just have time to get to the bank and make the track!"

"But Russell!" *Had he lost his mind? And I haven't a decent thing to wear.* "You don't know anything about horses?"

"Hey, stupid!

"I know I don't, dear, but the horses do!"

How about my stinking sardines?

By the time they reached the main grandstand, tired horses had just returned from the first race, a six furlongs affair for maiden fillies.

Knew I could do it! panted Contrary Mary, the favorite, as a minor film actress placed the winner's wreath around her foam-specked neck.

"Let's go around to the paddock," suggested Russell after they bought programs and pencils.

"What for?" asked his wife. *And what in the world is a paddock?*

"Why it's a . . . That is, I think it'll be interesting to see

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the horses in the next race warming up."

Ten entries in the second race, one and a half miles, were being walked around the colorful paddock by their handlers.

"That seems like an awfully small track to race on," remarked Juno who thought the Kentucky Derby was a restaurant.

"They aren't racing, dear. They're getting warmed up for the next event." Russell got as close to the rail as he could. No. 8 was grumbling. *Here I'm carrying* 122 *pounds and that* Jet Pilot's *only got* 110. *And I hear he did the distance in* 2:13 *yesterday morning.*

A jet black four-year-old tossed his head in the air and whinnied confidently. *And I feel great today. I'm gonna run you birds in the ground.*

Russell, who had quickly adjusted himself to the reading of horses' minds, had no difficulty in determining that though Jet Pilot was very popular with the others, he was, to quote Hot Foot, No. 6, "a shoo-in."

The tall man could barely restrain his excitement as he dragged his perplexed wife to the pari-mutual windows. He stopped at the $100 window.

"A hundred on Jet Pilot," stammered the excited Russell.

"A hundred ducats or a hundred dollars, mister?" asked the bored and impatient man behind the window.

"D . . .d . . . dollars," stammered Russell who had never bet more than two dollars previously. He grabbed his precious ticket and then joined Juno who was staring perplexedly at the ever-changing tote board.

"Something seems to be wrong with that big billboard," she said. "The numbers keep changing."

"We're betting on No. 11, Jet Pilot," he informed her.

"No. 11? What does that 37 next to his number mean?"

"Thirty-seven!" exclaimed the surprised Russell who had learned about horses during the two weeks Temporary Duty the previous summer at Fort Monmouth. "That means if he wins we get thirty-seven bucks for each two dollars we bet."

"Oh, won't that be nice. Then we'll win thirty-five dollars and I can buy that little end table I was telling you about."

Russell gulped. "No, dear, counting our original investment, we'll win one thousand and eight hundred and fifty dollars."

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"One thousand and eight hundred and fifty dollars!" squeaked the statuesque woman.

"They're off!" shouted the crowd as if instructed by an unseen movie director.

Cheers grew until, when the horses pounded down the home stretch, there was a giant roar.

"Who's winning?" asked the puzzled Juno.

"I don't know," answered her near-sighted husband who had seen only a fast blur on the track.

There was a concluding shout and then a mad whistle of wonder when the tote board lit up with the final figures.

"Can't you see on the board who won yet?" asked the blinking Russell.

"N . . . n . . . number 11! But you were wrong about the thirty-seven dollars."

"I was?"

"It says up there forty-two dollars and fifty cents, twenty-one dollars, and . . . "

"Two thousand and twenty-five dollars profit!" automatically figured the mathematical Russell.

By the fifth race, they had won a little over $20,000 and Juno was close to being hysterical.

"Why didn't you come out here before, Russell?" she asked as they dashed towards the paddock once more.

"Well, I—"

"It seems an awfully easy way to earn a living!"

The fifth, according to the nine horses in the race, was a cinch for the ever popular Cap'n Bells, the 3-1 favorite. Cap'n Bells, herself, was modest but the others in the race spent their time arguing about who was going to win second and third money.

"Who do we bet on this time?" panted Juno accompanying her husband to the hundred-dollar window.

Russell looked at her with misgiving for he deplored gambling and didn't like to see Juno becoming afflicted with the disease. "Number 4."

"How many, brother?" asked the now respectful parimutuel man. "And who the heck do you know?"

"Oh, a thousand will be enough this time." He turned to his wife. "Then I think we should go home."

"Don't be silly!" cut in the avid Juno. "Bet the whole twenty thousand dollars. You told me that Number 4 was a sure thing! We can't afford to lose all that money. You know that Mother needs her gallstones out."

"We have plenty already to take Mother's gallstones out.

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And anything else she wants, too. Besides it's all a gamble."

"You bet everything!"

Russell sighed as he handed all but one thousand dollars to the impressed man and received in turn a fistful of tickets.

"We'll be millionaires!" cried June. "We'll be——"

"Money does not necessarily bring happiness," lectured Russell.

The shouts from the grandstand made Juno grab her husband by the hand and pull him towards the track.

It was a two-horse race between Cap'n Bells and Icarus, a 10-1 outsider. The two maidens (the owner of Icarus never found out the original flier was a boy) tore down the home stretch neck and neck, finishing so closely it was impossible to tell which had won.

After a slight pause, there was a cough from the loud speaker and then a voice droned, "Attention, please! We have a photo finish and results will be announced in a moment."

Russell pushed his way to the railing to get as near to the exhausted horses as possible.

"The final results of the fifth race, six furlongs, claiming," rasped the loud speaker. "The winner in a photo finish, Icarus paying twenty-one eighty, eleven, and six seventy."

There was a groan from the crowd which had backed the favorite.

Russell gulped. "Well, guess you have to lose one once in awhile."

Juno answered with a low moan.

What happened to you? asked a foam-specked horse as it passed by.

That little jerk Maloney gave me the whip. He oughta know I can't stand the whip! And I was a sure thing, grumbled Cap'n Bells,

Well, that's what makes horse races, was the philosophical retort of the other.

"Guess we'd better go home now," said Juno in a suspiciously husky voice. "We lost all our money."

"Oh, no," replied her husband brightly. "I held out one thousand dollars. We still have nine hundred dollars profit."

Juno excitedly pulled at her husband's right arm. "Let's get over to the paddock. There still are four races left! We can make . . ."

Russell calmly herded his wife towards one of the exit gates. "We're going home while we still have enough money for Mother's gall bladder . . ."

Gallstones.

"Gallstones. Well, it just

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goes to prove that horses are only human."

What?

"Except for one thing. Evidently horses say and think exactly the same things."

To look at the tall, stoop-shouldered, studious Russell, no one would guess that he was extremely passionate and romantic. But he was.

And similarly, the beautiful but imposing Juno gave the impression of being utterly frigid. But she wasn't.

The Peters' love life had been, until then, subdued, tentative and infrequent; for each was afraid of offending the other.

But when Russell, snug in his conservative checked pajama's, climbed into their bed that night, he was astounded to discover telepathetically that Juno was as eager to essay untrodden paths as he was. And so the two gained new experience along lines indubitably frowned at by the church elders.

The next morning, Russell was happily whistling as he shaved himself. Life had reached its most ecstatic moment eight and one half hours previously when Juno's subconscious told him a) she loved him madly, b) she always would, and c) she thought he was cute-looking.

"Good morning honey!" Juno, looking fresh and under thirty, kissed him on the back of the neck. "Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed when she noticed the bruise on the side of his neck. "What happened to——"

"Don't you remember, you silly girl?" In spite of the shaving cream on his face, he turned and kissed Juno on the mouth.

After a minute, she wiped the shaving cream off her face and whispered, "Do you have to go to work today?"

Russell laughed happily. "I'll be back at five-thirty. We can have an early dinner and then——"

Juno sighed. "It's going to be such a long, long day." Then she kissed the bruise and, singing gaily, went into the kitchen.

Russell didn't have to read her mind that morning.

Nine men sat around the long, mahogany table. In front of each was a neat little pad of paper and three needle-pointed pencils. The pad in front of Maxwell, President of Hartford Mutual, was filled with eighteen mystical numbers ranging from 132 to 595. To satisfy your curiosity,

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these numbers indicated the yardage of the golf course at the exclusive Mahosset Country Club. Similar doodles, all of about the same importance, graced the other pads except Russell's. His automatic drawings would have made a happy man of S. Freud, the eminent doodle-reader.

"We've gone over your proposed articles," boomed the two-hundred-fifty pound Maxwell, who made a public display of his sixty years of bountilful living. "And I think I can speak for my colleagues when I say . . ."

"Yes, J. B.," automatically chimed in a moon-faced man sitting next to him.

"When I say," continued Maxewll after a glare at his third Vice-President in charge of Graphs, "that we are prepared to enter this merger with United with clean hands and all our cards on the table!" The big man pounded both hands on the table, waking up one Mutual and two United representatives. "In other words, we're prepared to sign!" He looked benignly across the table at the United Life group.

"J. B., I'd like to have a short, very short, conference with my people," said Finke smiling slyly.

"Go right ahead, Finke." Maxwell waved his unlit cigar generously.

"Well, what's what?" asked the excited Finke impatiently as soon as the United men had gathered in one corner of the room.

"Wellll . . ." Russell paused. "It's a little difficult."

Finke grabbed the pad which Russell had in his right hand. "Let's have a look at your notes." He looked. "What in the devil?"

Russell retrieved his pad. "Ah, sir—it's in code. Shall I start from the beginning of the meeting? Mr. Finke was feeling a little bilious from his lunch of fried clams and he wanted more air in the room."

"I know, I know! Get down to important things!"

"And then he looked you gentlemen over and characterized each of you with a single word apiece." Russell unemotionally turned to each of the attentive men in turn. "Moron. Dim-wit. Stupid." And turning towards the fourth one in the group, Finke, he concluded with, "Shifty!"

Finke stilled the rising clamor. "Forget personalities, gentlemen." He turned to Russell. "What about the merger? Does he have anything up his sleeve?"

Russell nodded. "Yes, sir."

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"What is it?" hissed Finke.

"Clause 28b."

"Clause 28b!" murmured the four United men in unison.

"Evidently there's something in the very fine print which would enable them to buy one percent of Common stock after six months and thereby have control of the merged companies."

"Why the dirty, low-down . . ." Finke's face was red with anger. He turned and walked belligerently up to Maxwell.

"You boys ready to affix the old John Hancock now?" asked the still complacent Maxwell.

"How about Clause 28b!" Finke waved an accusing finger at the surprised Mutual president.

"What's Clause 28b got to do with anything?"

"We weren't born yesterday. You're planning to sandbag us!"

"It—it's not true. I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes you do." Finke turned and beckoned to Russell. "Come here, Peters. Do your stuff!"

Russell stepped forward without haste.

Maxwell looked at the tall man with interest. *Who the devil is he?*

"Who the devil is he?" repeated Russell in a conversational tone of voice.

"What's going on here?" sputtered the perplexed Maxwell. *What kind of a gag . . .*

"What kind of a gag . . ." cut in Russell.

"Hey, what is this anyway?"

"We brought a telepath in with us today," announced Finke triumphantly. "And it's a darn good thing we did!"

"Telepath?"

"Mind reader to you. He can read your mind perfectly. That's why we know about Clause 28b."

"Well, I'll be God . . ." muttered Maxwell in a reverent voice.

"One moment, gentlemen," interposed Russell in a well-modulated but commanding voice.

The others looked at him; four with respect and four with distrust.

"I think it's only fair to tell you all that Mr. Finke, who originally wrote Clause 28b, had intended doing exactly the same as Mr. Maxwell. That's why he's so angry."

"Why, you stupid idiot!" Finke would have struck his Special Agent but he was too overcome.

Maxwell suddenly burst into gargantuan roars.

"You're fired!" screamed the

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apoplectic Finke rushing at his employee.

Maxwell, laughing good-humoredly, restrained the smaller man. "Tell us, son . . . tell us why you spilled the beans?" he asked in his booming bass.

Russell cleared his voice. "Gentlemen . . ." He looked towards the United men. "None of you bothered to ask me about the ethical principles involved in a power like telepathy," he began with pedantic heat.

"What's all this got . . ." started Finke.

"Let him talk," soothed Maxwell.

"I was willing to read the minds of the Mutual representatives and if I discovered any chicanery I wouldn't have hesitated in revealing it." He frowned because he was semantically unhappy about his phraseology. But he forced himself to continue when he was transfixed by glares from Finke. "However, when I saw how self-righteous you, Mr. Finke, acted when you were planning the same trick, it made me sick. Now you can fire me, as you intend doing anyway."

"You're not being fired!" boomed Maxwell.

Finke turned on the big man. "Who do you think you are, President of United Life?"

Maxwell smiled. "I'm co-president of United-Mutual and this young man is one of our most valuable pieces of property."

"You—you mean you still want the merger?" squeaked Finke.

"Why, of course. We all know it's our only salvation. And now that we've pulled all the aces out of our respective sleeves we can get down to business." He made a sweeping scratchy movement with a pen on one of the contracts. "We'll just eliminate Clause 28b." The big man good-naturedly put an arm around the still indignant Finke. "I always did say you were a shifty devil, Freddy, and I'm darned glad we're going to be on the same team."

Finke looked craftily at the big man and then slowly smiled. "Well, I guess things worked out pretty good at that." He looked resentfully at Russell. "But I'm darned if I like——"

Maxwell smiled with good-natured irony. "As long as this young man is on hand, I'm sure we'll get along swimmingly, Freddy. And I move we make Peters vice-president in charge of Liason at thirty

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thousand a year." *And he's worth every cent of it.*

Russell smiled and nodded in acceptance.

And, to look in the future, the astute young man *was* worth every cent of it, even though he had lost his telepathic powers the moment he'd been offered the job.

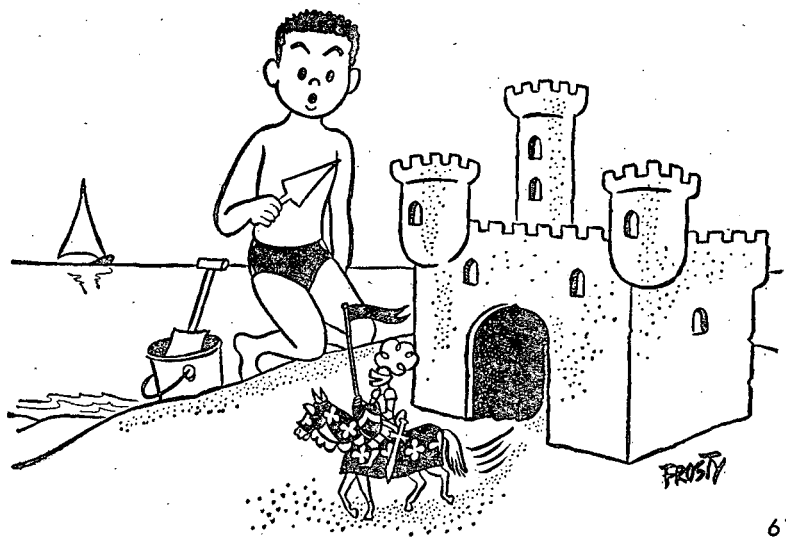
Russell's home life continued to be an extremely well-adjusted and happy one.

"Dear," often says the blushing but pleased Juno who was never told of the real reason behind her husband's meteoric rise to success, "sometimes I think you can actually read my mind." **THE END**

"MADAM, I HAVE HERE ——" *(Concluded from page 43)*

lows about a block from each other. Everywhere else even the stones had been melted into flat hard surfaces. And Henry knew it was the same from pole to pole, from the top to the bottom of old Mother Earth.

He had been up most of the night, so he went back in and crawled into bed. And as he lay drowsing he thought of how Nature hated a vacuum and did all in her power not only to populate the earth but to keep it populated. Now here was the Widow Jessup—and here was Henry. There would be no work today. He decided that he'd call on the widow as soon as he was rested up. **THE END**



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HE TOOK WHAT HE WANTED

By C. H. THAMES

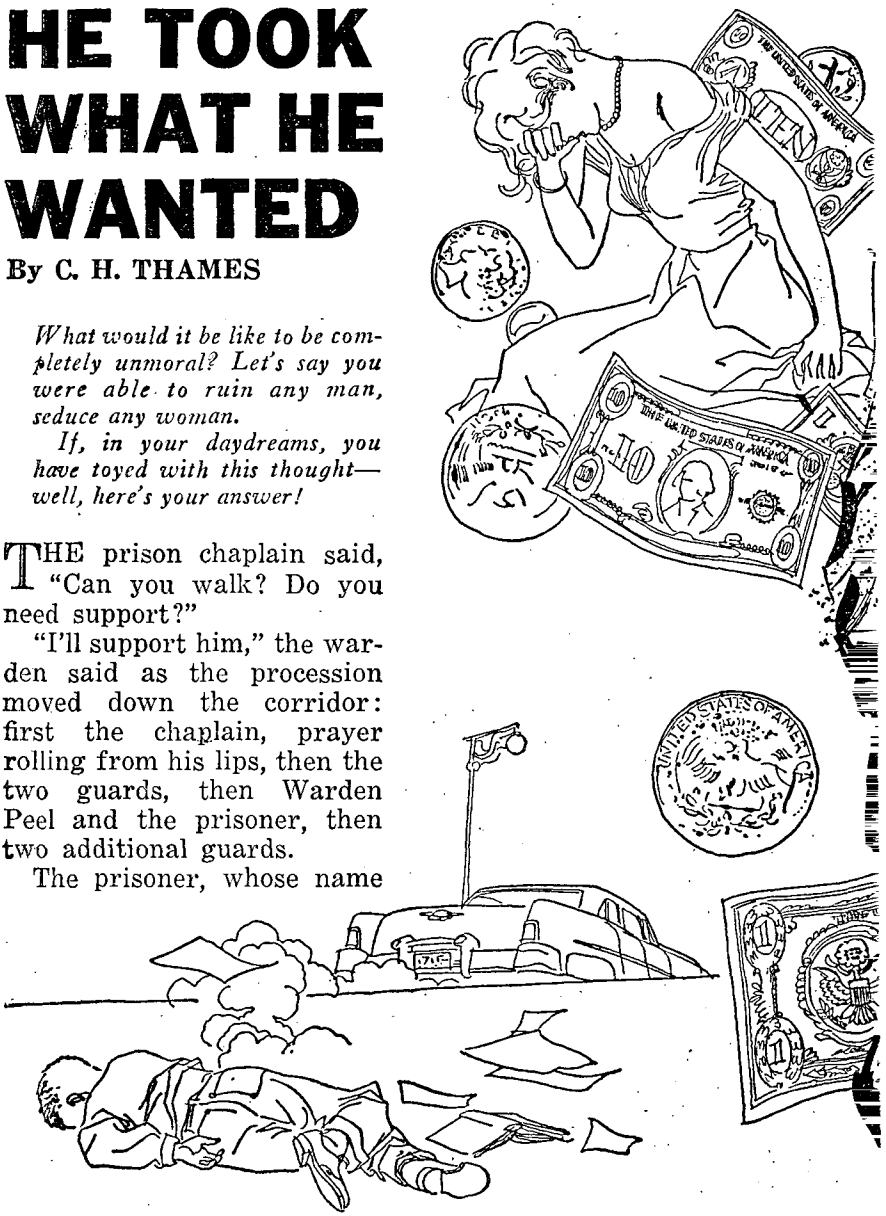
What would it be like to be completely unmoral? Let's say you were able to ruin any man, seduce any woman.

If, in your daydreams, you have toyed with this thought—well, here's your answer!

THE prison chaplain said, "Can you walk? Do you need support?"

"I'll support him," the warden said as the procession moved down the corridor: first the chaplain, prayer rolling from his lips, then the two guards, then Warden Peel and the prisoner, then two additional guards.

The prisoner, whose name



Ruthlessly he set about wrecking the fortunes and live

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of innocent people. Could nothing stop this man of Evil?

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was Ben Hunter, shook his elbow loose of the warden's big fingers. One of the guards tensed. "That's all right," Ben Hunter said. "I can walk without any help, that's all."

"He's been a model prisoner," Warden Peel said, talking to no one in particular. "If all death-house prisoners were like him, fewer wardens would get ulcers."

"A model prisoner," Ben Hunter said, walking mechanically alongside the warden.

"What did you say?"

Ben Hunter smiled faintly. "That's me, all right. A model prisoner. All my life I've been a model prisoner. You know that, Warden?"

The rear guards looked at each other. One of them shook his head, a slow sad motion in the gloom of the corridor. "It gets most of them toward the end," he whispered to his companion. "I've seen them all, Charlie. It gets most of them."

"You mean, the mind goes?"

"Naw. But they either get hysterical or they start saying things that don't mean nothing or else they can't even talk at all."

"I wasn't aware you had been confined before," Warden Peel was saying.

Ben Hunter laughed. The laugh surprised everyone. Even the chaplain turned around, his lips still forming the words of prayer. "I've been confined, all right," Ben Hunter said. "Look at me. You tell me to walk, and I walk. I'm walking to my death. They're going to hang me out there. Like a sheep led to the slaughter, that's me. You know what my Judas ram was?"

"You don't have to talk," Warden Peel said self-consciously.

"You want to hear what my Judas ram was?"

"If he wants to talk, he ought to go ahead," said the chaplain. "It often helps."

"Love," said Ben Hunter.

No one else said anything.

"Love," Ben Hunter repeated. "It was like a noose." He smiled again because the word made the warden wince. "Just like the noose that's going to hang me. Love for my wife. Earlier, for my folks. Love thy neighbor—"

The chaplain's voice rose in unconscious protest.

"If I had my way over again . . ." Ben Hunter said, his voice drifting off hopelessly.

" 'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' " intoned the chaplain. " 'He that believeth

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in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live . . .' "

"Love!" said Ben Hunter. "It's wrong to have faith in love, any kind of love. I'm going to die for it. I'm innocent. I didn't kill him. I swear I didn't—"

" 'But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.' "

"There's the door," one of the guards said. "Seeing the door that leads outside always gets them."

"Not me," said Ben Hunter, who had heard him. "You don't have to worry about me. I died a hundred times already. You die over and over again, waiting. After a while, you go numb someplace inside and you stop fearing death. You only wish you could live it all over again and hate where you loved, think of yourself where you thought of others. That's what I would do."

"Accept God's grace, my son," said the chaplain.

"A model prisoner," Ben Hunter said again. "That's me. A sucker. Society was my prison. The world was my prison. If only . . ."

Just then a voice said, "I'm from the Governor's office."

A man materialized in the corridor, between the small procession and the door.

"Where did he come from?" Warden Peel demanded.

One of the guards covered the newcomer with his .38 Special. The procession came to a halt.

"You don't have to go through that door," the stranger said.

Warden Peel thought he felt a cold wind pass across his face. He trembled. "Who are you?" he said. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Smathers," the stranger said in a friendly voice. "I'm Smathers from the Governor's office." He showed credentials which said he was Smathers from the Governor's office. He took another paper out of his billfold and said, "This is a full pardon for Death Row prisoner 19-416J, signed by the Governor today. You see, it releases Hunter in my custody."

The warden examined the pardon. So did the chaplain. One of the guards shook Ben Hunter's hand, but when he saw what was in the prisoner's eyes, he let his own hand drop.

"It's official," said Warden Peel. "It has the Governor's signature. Everything is in order. But this is the first time in my experience a full pardon was granted on the eve of execution. A stay of

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execution or a commutation of sentence, yes, but a pardon—"

"No one is asking you," Smathers said crisply. "You are an ex-army general, aren't you? It's quite evident you haven't had too much experience with the laws of this State."

"Five years here at the Rock—"

"Apparently you think it's not enough. This is the Governor's signature, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And this prisoner is Ben Hunter?"

"Yes."

"Then he is fully pardoned in my custody, as it says here. Take him. Bathe him. Dress him in decent clothing. I will sign the release forms."

The warden stood transfixed.

"Our Lord, in His infinite wisdom . . ." said the chaplain.

"Come, come," Smathers snapped.

"If I had my life to live over again, if I could just start now, with the lesson I've learned," Ben Hunter said, "what a difference it would make."

"You can!" Smathers assured him. "You can. Oh, not live your life over again. No one can do that. But you can start again, with the knowledge now in your possession."

"The Lord is my shepherd," the chaplain said. For some reason he shuddered when Smathers walked past him.

"Smathers," Ben Hunter said. "That's some name."

"What's wrong with it?"

They were in Smather's car, driving through the night toward Center City.

"What's wrong with it? I'll tell you what's wrong. There isn't anyone named Smathers. It's a cartoon name, like Pervis or Smedley. Who ever heard of anyone named Smathers?"

"I'm Smathers," Smathers said.

"You made it up."

"That's my name."

"You're not from the Governor's office, are you? Am I dreaming?"

"You're not dreaming. You have been pardoned fully. It was the Governor's signature, wasn't it?"

"But did the Governor sign it?"

"Well, no. Don't be so technical."

"Then I'll have to run!" Ben Hunter cried. "In the morning, they'll be looking for me."

"Relax," Smathers said, smiling.

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"It's easy for you to say relax."

"This is an election year, Hunter. The newspapers already have the story of your pardon. The Governor and the whole state administration will be a laughingstock if they admit it was all a mistake."

"On what grounds was I pardoned?"

"It said the real killer was caught, and confessed."

"Was he? Did he?"

"No."

"What are you?" Ben Hunter demanded. "The Devil?"

"There's no such thing as the Devil. Hunter, I suggest you don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"But I'm free."

"Fully."

"Can you at least tell me why?"

"You're innocent, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I stopped believing in happy endings a long time ago."

"I like you, Hunter."

"You still haven't said why."

"Because you're fed up with loving. Because you're ready to hate now. Really ready to hate."

"Not just to hate," Ben Hunter said almost devoutly. "To live for myself. For number one. I'm the guy that matters. If I don't matter to myself, I won't matter to anyone."

"Hate the world!" Smathers shouted. "You have the idea, now. Sing a paean of hate to the world, my friend. Did you ever read Nietzsche? Wasn't Nietzsche right?"

"Yeah," said Ben Hunter. "Yeah."

"The Judaic-Christian morality was a conspiracy," Smathers said. " 'The meek shall inherit the Earth.' That's rot. The strong should inherit the Earth. They deserve it. What is charity, Ben Hunter? The weak, banding together, convincing the strong they should relent, show mercy. Be one of the strong, Ben Hunter!"

He did not answer.

"You have dwelled among the meek all your life."

"I'm through with that," Ben Hunter said.

"That is why I saved you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

Smathers leaned against the inside of the car door on the driver's side. Smather's became tenuous, like smoke. He disappeared.

"Hey, Smathers! For crying out loud—"

Ben Hunter slid across the seat as the car lurched toward

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the shoulder of the road. He barely got behind the wheel in time, easing the car out of its driverless skid.

It began to rain. As Ben Hunter leaned forward to find the wiper control on the unfamiliar dashboard, he saw the car's registration taped to the steering pole. The vehicle had been registered with the Motor Vehicle Bureau only yesterday. The name of the owner was Ben Hunter.

It had all been planned this way.

By whom? And why?

"Forget it," Ben Hunter told himself. "Don't be a chump. Don't ever be a sucker again."

He switched on the car radio. The radio said there was trouble off the China coast and it might rain tonight. The radio also said Ben Hunter had been pardoned and released from prison.

What the radio didn't say, what only Ben Hunter knew, was it was like being born again. He had died, not once but a hundred times. Because he was weak. Because he had loved.

From now on he was going to start living.

"Ben, honey. Ben. Just let me look at you."

"The reporters are still out there, I guess."

"You're here, Ben. You're alive. That's what counts."

Mary had cried first, and then she had laughed. A regular heart-on-her-sleeve girl, Ben Hunter thought. I used to be that way, too. But not any more. The strangest part of it is, I don't seem to love her anymore. I used to love her, but now—now I feel nothing for her, nothing . . .

"Ben? I said, do you want another drink?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. Sure."

They touched glasses. They drank. Ben Hunter looked at this woman who was his wife. Tall girl. Blonde and pretty. Big blue eyes red-rimmed from crying. Slender figure with full upthrust breasts under the sheer jacket of the lounging pajamas. He put his drink down and took her in his arms and kissed her. He felt nothing except animal desire. Every other part of him was cold, untouched, distant. He smiled at his reflection in the mirror over her shoulder as her lips tickled his neck. He thought: it has nothing to do with you, baby. I have nothing against you. But just don't ever get in my way . . .

Then he took her.

In the morning, he went to

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his office as if nothing had happened. Mary had suggested a vacation; Merrill Pierce, the senior partner of his firm, had also suggested a vacation. Give the staff some time to realize their boss is neither a killer nor Lazarus, Pierce had said over the phone. I'm restless, Ben Hunter had told him. I'm coming in.

Sure, I'm coming in. Last night was wonderful. Last night was the way to live. Stay with it, Ben Hunter. Stay with it.

Several people he did not know were in the reception room behind the pebble-glass door which bore the legend: *Merrill Pierce and Hunter, Investments.* The brochures on the tables in the waiting room showed how you didn't have to go to New York to invest in the stock market. Merrill Pierce and Hunter did it for you, right here in Center City.

Ben Hunter smiled at Sally Kirk, the receptionist. A normal weekday morning smile. Sally was a small rounded brunette with a pony tail, a stream of ready repartee and an outspoken frankness which Ben Hunter had always admired objectively.

"I heard the chief on the phone this morning, Lazarus," she said, smiling.

"So it's Lazarus, huh?"

"Well, that's what the chief said, Mr. Hunter."

He grinned. "You're staring at me, Miss Kirk!"

"You're a regular phe-nom, sir. If you don't mind my saying it."

"I don't mind."

"No vacation. Coming in like nothing happened. And the way you look."

"How do I look?"

"You look wonderful, Mr. Hunter. I never saw you looking better."

"Is that so, Miss Kirk?" Ben Hunter said, walked over and kissed her cheek.

Color flooded the girl's face. "You—you never did that before."

"Are you sorry?"

"That you didn't or you did?"

Ben Hunter was thinking: this kid's all right. I never realized it before, but she's got sex appeal. Not loud, but it's there.

"That I didn't," he said.

She smiled and the sex appeal was louder, but not really loud yet. He thought: the old Ben Hunter would go inside and forget about this. You're married, Hunter, he would say to himself. Of course Mary isn't the only pretty girl. But you love each other and it's for life. And

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the new Ben Hunter? Yesterday, you almost died, Hunter. They almost hung you by the neck until you were dead for a crime you never committed. You died many times in your mind. You know what it's like. From now on you're going to live. You like the girl? You can have her . . .

"There you are, Ben. Come in here a minute."

It was Merrill Pierce, looking like a society undertaker in his lampblack suit, rounded collar and black knit tie. Pierce was forty-five years old and had left the Wall Street firm of Ross, Cowan, Cowan and Pierce ten years ago to open his own investment office here in Center City. He had taken thirty-two-year-old Ben Hunter on ten years ago, had given him a junior partnership five years later, and was as scrupulously honest as any investment broker in the business.

"I don't have to tell you how I feel, Ben," he said.

"Thanks, Merrill."

"Are you going to do anything about it?" Pierce asked as they entered his office.

"What do you mean, do anything?"

"You said you were innocent. I believed you. So did our lawyers, but the circumstantial evidence was so heavy—"

"You mean, do anything about the real killer?"

"That's right."

"You know, it's a funny thing. You won't believe this, Merrill, but until I came in here I hadn't given it any thought."

"That's incredible."

"I know what you're thinking. Because every time you visited me I said if I ever got out I would spend the rest of my life finding the real killer."

"Yes, and now this sudden change—"

"Merrill, I feel like a different man. I can't explain it to you. It's too new. Frankly, I don't know if I'll ever want to explain it to you."

"I don't understand."

"It wouldn't be worth it. Spending the rest of my life looking for him. You see, I've got more enjoyable things to do. Does that make sense?"

Merrill Pierce, who was out of his depth talking about abstract morality unless the standard cliches of religion were applied, nodded offhandedly and changed the subject: "Larry was in yesterday, Ben."

"The kid brother?"

"Of course. I can't convince him he hasn't got the right

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mind for investment. Too flighty. I finally decided how I can convince him."

"How's that?"

"It will cost me plenty." Merrill Pierce smiled ruefully. "Remember that trust fund I've put aside for Larry? I'm opening the sluicegates, Ben. He can invest it. All of it, if he wants. In today's uncertain market, Larry's just the type who will lose his shirt. So, after he loses the entire trust fund, I'll simply replace it, be out fifty thousand bucks, and have a wiser kid brother on my hands."

"That's a lot of money."

"But worth it, Ben. Don't you think?"

"What happens if the kid starts losing more than you have in the trust fund?"

"Kid, huh? Larry's a few years older than you. But I guess you're right. He is a kid."

"But what happens?"

"That's easy. I'm instructing the New York firm that will handle his investment to give him leeway of ten thousand dollars, then to contact me. The ten thousand will come out of my own account, you see."

"You really must like that brother of yours."

"Yes. Listen, I've got an appointment at the bank in fifteen minutes." Pierce found an unsealed letter in the top drawer of his desk and gave it to Ben Hunter. "This is the letter which tells the New York firm how to handle my brother's investments. Countersign it and have Miss Kirk mail it, will you?"

"Sure thing," said Ben Hunter.

"And Ben," Pierce said, getting up and holding out his hand solemnly, "I don't have to tell you how I feel. Great to have you back. I never doubted you for a minute, Ben. I still think, though, a vacation might not have been a bad idea. Well, I guess you know what you're doing."

"Yeah," Ben Hunter said.

They shook hands and then Pierce left the office. When he heard the outside door of the suite close, Ben Hunter opened the letter and read it carefully. He saw Merrill Pierce's simple, surprisingly childish signature at the bottom of the sheet of paper. He could forge it perfectly. He often had, with Pierce's knowledge and permission. But this was different. This time it would not be with Pierce's permission.

Because Ben Hunter was going to change the letter.

He inserted a fresh sheet

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of letterhead stationery in his typewriter. When he had finished the alteration, the letter was essentially the same except for one thing: there was no limit on the leeway given to Larry Pierce. If he went through the trust fund he could keep on going—right through his brother's bank account and securities, perhaps.

Ben Hunter smiled as he signed Merrill Pierce and then his own name. Junior partner, he thought. What the hell for? I know everything Merrill knows. And maybe some day he'll have a change of heart about the kid brother and bring him into the business too, and then where would I be?

He sealed the letter, and went on thinking: his brother is liable to break him. Maybe he'll go into debt. To get out of debt, he'll have to sell his holdings in Merrill Pierce and Hunter to me.

Wasn't Smathers right? Didn't the world belong to the strong? Smathers. Funny, he hadn't thought about the strange man all morning . . .

He almost could see the new letters on the door: *Benjamin Hunter, Investments.*

He buzzed the office PBX, sealed the letter, waited with it for Sally Kirk. He watched her walk into the office. She remembered the unexpected kiss. You could see the memory of it, somehow, in her eyes. She walked carefully, splendidly, all the movement from her thighs down, like an experienced rhumba dancer.

You almost died, Ben Hunter. Society didn't care. You were innocent, but they were going to hang you.

"Come here, Miss Kirk," he said.

Her eyes sparkled. He could tell she liked the sound of his voice. She came to him and when she left fifteen minutes later with the new version of Merrill Pierce's letter, Ben Hunter scrubbed the lipstick off his face with a wadded paper towel from the dispenser near the sink in the corner.

Which, he thought, examining the carmine stains with satisfaction, was only the beginning.

He maintained a perfectly casual voice when Mary called him ten minutes later.

"You're a funny guy, Ben," Sally Kirk said two nights later.

"Yeah? What do you mean, funny?"

"Mr. Merrill Pierce and Mr. Ben Hunter. Don't you

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think the girls at the office talk about you?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, they do. Merrill Pierce, they say. Forty-five-year-old bachelor. But don't start panting, sister," Sally Kirk said, doing a good imitation of a party girl's older, wiser, but less successful cohort. "Because he's cold as Greenland in December. And Ben Hunter—married, sister. The personification of marital contentment. A suburban cow, chewing his cud and wearing blinkers. That's what they always used to say, Ben."

"Were they right?"

"Kiss me again and I'll tell you . . . Umm-mmm . . . Benn-nn . . . no, they were wrong. How wrong they were! Only, this gal's not going to tell them. I recognize a good thing when I see it, and I'm not going to give it up."

"Is that so?"

"Ben? Why are you looking at me like that? I didn't mean anything—"

"Don't ever say that again, unless you want to be just a receptionist. Or less."

"But what did I say?"

"I'm not a good thing to you, Sally. Understand? This has nothing to do with whether I'm a good thing or not or whether you're going to give me up or not. You're clay, Sally. Nothing but clay—"

"Aw, Ben. You better have another glass of champagne."

"Clay, do you understand that? Clay."

"So I'm clay. I'm the Queen of Sheba, if you want."

"That's much better. That's fine, Sally."

"It isn't so late. Do you have to go yet?"

"No. The wife thinks—"

"I wish you didn't have to talk about her."

"The wife thinks I'm working late. Very late."

"If you don't, I can kind of dream."

"If I don't what?"

"Talk about her."

"Clay, Sally. Don't forget it."

"You scare me when you look at me like that."

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"Well, at least that's something."

"Sally, are you laughing at me?"

"N-no, sir. I guess I'm laughing at myself. At Miss Sally Kirk, who should have known better because she's been around—but didn't."

"Now you're crying."

"So, I'm crying."

"Is there anything I can do?"

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"Sure. There's plenty. But you won't."

"Then suppose you bring the champagne."

"Sure, if you want. Ben, you louse, I—"

"You what, Sally?"

"I'm falling in love with you. I didn't want to. I know I shouldn't. I—"

"That's right," Ben Hunter said. "You shouldn't. Now, bring the champagne."

A moment later he sighed and sipped the delightful amber drink. Sally Kirk was a nice girl, if a shade too free with her body. Mary was a nice girl, if a shade too much in love with Ben Hunter. Both of them, he thought, in love with me. That's fine. I like it fine. It's stable on Mary's part, it's something to lean on when you need leaning. For Sally, it's impulsive. It's bright and burning, like a flame.

He might have a nightcap with Mary when he got home. He thought she would wait up for him, despite the hour. Meanwhile, there was Sally and love.

He thought Mr. Smathers would approve.

Merrill Pierce did not enter the office until eleven a.m. the following Thursday morning. He was very white when he came in. He looked as if he hadn't slept at all the previous night. "Ben," he said, walking into Ben Hunter's office and sitting down facing the window. "Give me a drink, Ben?"

"Before lunch?"

"I need a drink, anything will do."

Ben Hunter made two generous highballs at the portable bar along one wall of the room. He brought them over and sat down on a corner of his desk. He watched Merrill Pierce gulp his drink like iced tea.

"What's the matter, Merrill?"

"It's Larry."

"The kid brother?"

"Yes, Ben. Something happened. Something went wrong, I don't know what."

"You want another one, Merrill?"

The older man nodded. When Ben Hunter came back from the bar, Pierce was talking over the PBX phone. "That's right, Miss Kirk. A letter dated March 29th. To the New York firm of Logan, Harris, Donaldson and Cooper. Re Lawrence Pierce. Bring it right in." He turned to Ben Hunter. "I can't believe I made that kind of mistake. I'm checking the carbon copy of the letter."

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"What letter? What kind of mistake?"

"Logan called me at home last night. Said he was worried. Claimed there was no ten per cent restriction in my letter. Claimed Larry's been going through my savings in an effort to recoup."

"How bad is it?"

"We won't know until the market closes today for sure. But Good Lord, Ben. I don't know what I'm going to do. Logan says it's very bad."

Just then the door opened. Sally Kirk walked in, gave each of the partners an identical businesslike smile and handed Pierce a sheet of manifold paper. Pierce all but pounced on it as the girl left the office.

"Here, Ben!" he cried. His hands were trembling, the muscles of his cheeks twitching. He was shouting. "I swear I knew I was right! Damn it. Look at this, Ben. It says so right here. Ten per cent. What the hell kind of a stinking trick does Logan think he's trying to pull? Read it. Go ahead and read it."

"Ten per cent," said Ben Hunter. "That's what it says."

Pierce gulped the remainder of his second drink. "What I want to know, what does that son-of-a-bitch gain out of breaking me like this?" He leaped at the phone, uncradled it, shouted: "Get me Logan and-the-rest-of-it in New York!" He slammed the receiver down on its cradle and told Ben Hunter, "We'll see about this."

Yeah, Ben Hunter thought. We'll see about it. And learn the truth pretty soon, too. Because Logan can produce the original of the letter and then you'll know someone tampered with it. The only possible person is—Ben Hunter. Well, it won't help you now. There's no sense dragging Logan into it . . .

"You can cancel that call, Merrill."

"Cancel it? What the hell are you talking about?"

Ben Hunter lit a cigarette and held the lighter in his hand. "Let me see the flimsy of that letter."

Pierce gave it to him, then watched incredulously while Ben Hunter touched flame to a corner of the flimsy and let the fire consume it.

"Give me that thing!" Pierce cried, but Ben Hunter held it out of his reach until he had nothing to deposit in the ashtray but a charred cinder. This he poked around with a pencil, pulverizing it to black powder.

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"What the hell's the matter with you?" Pierce shouted.

"Calm down. Don't raise your voice to me."

"What — did — you — say?"

"Just shut up and listen a minute. When Sally gets Logan on the phone, what do you think he's going to tell you? This, Merrill: there is no ten per cent limit in the letter you sent him. He can read it to you over the phone, he can prove it to you in a court of law if he has to."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I told you to lower your voice," Ben Hunter said in a tight whisper. "It means I changed the letter."

"You did what?"

"I took out the ten per cent. I made it unlimited. I signed your name. Since you've given me permission to sign it on and off for years, whenever it was convenient, no one can prove, not even a handwriting expert, which signature was which. I wrote your ticket to skid row, Merrill."

Emotion was building up in Pierce, but had not reached the surface yet. He stood there, his hands tightly balled against his sides. He said, "Why, Ben? In the name of God, why?"

"Because I felt like it. Because I thought I would have some fun doing it. Because I suddenly don't like you. Who cares why? I did it on impulse, Merrill. That's the way I live now, on impulse. It's a secret I can tell anyone, because I don't think anyone will spoil my fun. Nobody will have the guts."

"But I took you in, ten years ago, fresh out of college. I—"

"Sure. Junior partner. Until the day you died. Don't you think I know as much about investment as you do?"

"My capital started the firm, Ben. My—"

The PBX buzzed. Ben Hunter picked up the phone, said: "Yeah. Okay, Sally. It's for you, Merrill. Logan."

Pierce glared at him, then growled a hello into the mouthpiece. "Yes, Logan, I— what? What did you say? Yes, I'm still here. I'm listening. That bad? Yes. Yes, I understand. Sell short. Do anything you have to. It won't? All right, I see. Yes, of course. If you have to liquidate my holdings, you have to. I know. Nothing, I'm to expect nothing. All right. I heard you. In debt. I'll probably wind up a few thousand in debt. Thank you, Logan. No. I'm not blaming you. It was my mistake,

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not yours. Yes. Thanks for trying. Thanks for everything. Good-bye." Pierce hung up the phone and stood there, gazing out the window.

"Ten years," he said. "Ten years of my life. All my savings. Wiped out."

Ben Hunter smiled. "Hell, Merrill. I guess I owe you something after all. I'll clear up all your debts, up to fifty grand. I have something put aside. I can do it."

"But I—"

"Yeah, there's a reason. We change places, junior partner. That's the deal."

Pierce said nothing at first. He continued staring out the window. Faintly, Ben Hunter heard the sound of an angry horn, of screeching tire-rubber. Pierce turned around and faced him.

"I ought to kill you, Ben."

"Save the histrionics. Is it a deal?"

"You've ruined me. I ought to kill you with my own hands."

"I'm scared stiff. See? See the way I'm trembling."

"At least if you had a reason. If you had a reason, it wouldn't be so bad. All right, some people are vindictive. Some people seek revenge. I thought you would be the type. I thought you would devote yourself to finding the real killer. Instead, you're taking your revenge out not on the man who sent you to jail to die for him, but on the whole world. Your enemy is the world, Ben. Isn't it?"

Ben Hunter finished his own highball. "Good try, Merrill. But you're miles off. It's so simple that you just refuse to believe it. I don't want revenge. I don't give a hang about revenge. I want to have fun. They almost hung me—before I had begun to live. Now I intend to live, every minute of every day, the rest of my life. Doing exactly what I want to do. And if I happen to step on people along the way, that's their tough luck."

"I'd be doing the human race a favor if I killed you. You're not human anymore."

"Is it a deal? We can have Trevers come down and write up the new partnership papers as soon as we find out how far in the red your kid brother has taken you."

Instead of answer, Pierce suddenly bellowed like an angry bull and lunged across the room at Ben Hunter, swinging his right fist in a wild, looping blow. The younger man parried it with his left forearm, then brought his own right hand up, whip-like, in a short, savage, jolt-

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ing bolo punch. Pierce crashed back against the desk and slid down along its side. He sat there, dazed, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

The door opened. Sally Kirk entered the office, looked at Pierce on the floor. "I—I'm sorry, Mr. Hunter. I—I thought—"

"Let me do the thinking around here."

"I heard a crash, and—"

"Miss Kirk!"

She took a deep breath to stop herself from sobbing. She hurried out of there.

"Is it a deal?" Ben Hunter said softly, indifferently.

"Help me up."

Ben Hunter grasped the older man's hands and yanked him to his feet. Grimacing, Pierce suddenly brought his knee up toward Ben Hunter's groin. But the young man pivoted and caught the thrust harmlessly on his thigh, then pushed the older man away. "You should have tried that the first time. The first time it might have got me."

"I was right. You aren't human."

"Is it a deal?"

"If I don't kill you, someone else will. You can't live the way you're living without it happening."

"Is it a deal?"

Merrill Pierce waited a full minute before answering. Finally he sighed and said, "Yes. It's a deal."

That spring, Ben Hunter became a name to reckon with in investment brokerage. In June, the Center City *Star* ran a series of articles called *Wall Street Comes to Center City* in which it was broadly hinted that while Ben Hunter had put Center City on the investment map he had done so not without the benefit of some shady deals and some broken hearts along the way.

"We neither condemn nor condone," the final article in the series concluded. "We have merely tried to point out that, far from being representative of the significant figures in American investment brokerage, Ben Hunter is unique, enigmatic, even iconoclastic."

"This is very funny," Ben Hunter told Pierce as he folded the newspaper and tossed it across his desk in the general direction of the wastebasket.

"What's funny, Ben?" Merrill Pierce had aged five years in less than that number of months. His face was seamed and lined, like a contour map. His eyes had lost their

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brightness and were deepset in deeper hollows above his cheeks. "Do you call this funny?"

"Yeah."

"What you did to McCoombs and Whitlock, that's funny?"

"Nobody told them to try and buck the selling wave I instigated."

"Or old man Petersby?"

"Investing is a risky business. I never told Petersby or anyone else different."

"Or Charlie Otten? He's broke, Ben."

"Give him a handout if you want. But that isn't what's so funny."

"Then what is?"

"They go to all this trouble building me up as a giant of the investment field, without realizing that newspaper series will be my swansong."

"I don't understand you, Ben."

"I'm finished. Getting out. I'm fed up to my ears with investment brokerage. I don't find it stimulating enough, Merrill. But you wouldn't understand that. It lacks challenge for me. It's too incredibly simple. You see, if you can keep all humane considerations out of your planning, you can't help but win in this business—or in any business, given a modicum of intelligence. So, I'm finished. I'm getting out. I won't be in tomorrow, Merrill."

"You're joking." The older man's face was very pale.

"No, I'm not joking. But you're afraid. Aren't you?"

"Why should I be afraid?"

"I'll tell you why. Because you were small time. Oh, you had a big brokerage, as Center City brokerages go. But now we're big by Wall Street standards, and I'm leaving all of it in your lap. So, you're scared. You don't know if you can handle it or not, isn't that right?"

Abruptly, the older man broke down. "Please, Ben. I don't know what your plans are. But don't go yet. Give me time. With your advice, I can liquidate some of our bigger holdings. Without it, I'm like a man who can't swim, cast adrift in the middle of the ocean."

"That's quite an admission, junior partner. Or shouldn't I rub it in?"

"Rub it in, if you want. Just bail me out, Ben, that's all I'm asking. Just bail me out."

Ben Hunter smiled and shook his head slowly. "I can't wait, Merrill. It's nothing personal, you understand."

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"With you it couldn't possibly be anything personal."

"I have other things on my mind."

"But if the stock market is too slow for you, what other form of busines—"

"Remember the first day I came back to work? Remember when you said you thought I'd be the kind of man who wants revenge? I had too many other things on my mind then. I wanted to set the world on fire, I thought. It wasn't that. I just wanted to satisfy my impulses. This is satisfying them."

"You mean, quitting?"

"I mean, finding the real killer now. That's what I'm going to do, Merrill. That's a real challenge."

"Mark my words, Ben. You'll go too far. You can push around our investors the way you've been doing, but when you're dealing with desperate men—"

"Cut it out, Merrill. You make me laugh. A typical, small-time, shyster broker who—"

"That's enough, Ben. Will I have to buy you out?"

Ben Hunter shrugged. "No, that's all right. I don't want your money, Merrill. I think you're going to need it in order to liquidate and still keep your head above water—*if* you can do it at all. I'll take twenty-five thousand or so just to keep me going for a while. Unless you have some objections?"

"What about Sally?"

"What about her?"

"Ben, I haven't been blind. The girl has been your mistress, hasn't she? Mind you, I neither condemn nor condone—"

"Just like the newspaper, eh? I've got a wife, Merrill. I'm a married man. Sally Kirk was never anything but a temporary adventure. She knew that."

"Well, then I suppose you won't be coming here again?"

"That's right." Ben Hunter stood up. They did not shake hands.

"Ben, I'd like to wish you luck—for whatever shred of decency is left in you."

"That's something you never did understand," Ben Hunter smiled. "I'm neither decent nor indecent, to use your words. I'm just trying to live the way a man would live if society didn't sit on him. You see? But no, you wouldn't. Well, good luck, Merrill."

"You think I'll never pull out of your investments with my skin, don't you?"

"I haven't thought about it one way or the other."

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The older man's face went suddenly blank. When Ben Hunter left the office, he turned back once out of curiosity and saw Pierce pouring a drink with unsteady hands.

Sally Kirk was alone in the waiting room, sea-sawing an emery board back and forth across her fingernails.

"Good-bye, kid," Ben Hunter said.

"You're leaving early today, Ben."

"Not just today, kid. I'm pulling out."

"Oh, Ben. You don't mean for good?"

"It's been swell, kid."

"Without telling a girl—"

"That's the way it is, Sally." Ben Hunter took his billfold from his inside coat pocket and gave Sally a thick wad of money. "Buy a summer wardrobe," he said.

She smiled a little, put the bills in her handbag. "I'll bet you expected me to cry."

"No. Not you."

"I feel like crying, you big lug. I don't know what it is about you. You're hard. You are no good. But I—I don't think any woman who knew you would feel any different about you than I do. It's because you're so—so natural, I guess. I love you, Ben. Maybe someday I'll find a guy crazy enough to marry me, but that will have nothing to do with it. I'll still love you. Every woman in the world would love you, if she knew you."

"Thank you, Sally."

"Don't thank me. I'm just telling the truth. You're wonderfully bad, Ben. Where are you going?"

He shook his head. "Trade secret," he said, grinning and chucking her chin playfully. All at once she reached up with both hands and pulled his head down over hers and kissed him on the lips.

"That's for me and all the other girls," she said, trembling a little. "All the girls who'll love you."

"It's been a lot of fun, Sally. You know that."

"If you don't get out of here, I'm going to cry. Give a girl a break, Ben. I'm trying hard not to cry."

Ben Hunter nodded and took one step toward the door. Just then the sound of a pistol shot roared through the suite of offices.

"That came from Mr. Pierce's office!" Sally cried.

Ben Hunter sprinted toward the door marked *Merrill Pierce,* opened it but did not advance into the room.

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Sally came up short behind him, her vision completely blocked by his broad shoulders.

"You better not look," he said. "There's nothing we can do."

"Oh, Ben. He killed himself?"

"Yeah."

"But why, Ben? Why? Is it—oh, no. Is it because you're leaving?"

"I think so."

"You knew he'd do this?"

"I thought he might."

"But you were going anyway?"

"What did I owe Merrill Pierce? If he couldn't handle a bigtime brokerage outfit, whose fault was that?"

"You knew it. You knew this would happen. But you were going. Ben, it's almost as if you pulled the trigger."

"Better call the police. From outside, Sally. It isn't pretty in there."

"You knew it and you—Ben, turn around. Turn around to me."

He turned slowly. He was not smiling, but there was faint mockery in his eyes.

"Don't leave me, Ben. I'm begging you. I'll get down on my knees if you want."

"I'm going, Sally."

"Ben, please. Oh, it isn't like Mr. Pierce. I won't kill myself. I guess I'm not the type. I guess I love life too much. But it won't be the same without you, Ben. Life won't be the same."

"You better call the police."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"They ought to be called immediately."

"All right. All right, I'll call them."

"When you're finished, call Logan in New York and see if he wants to buy us out and establish a branch office out here in Center City. This may work out very well."

"You're inhuman!"

"Am I?" he said, and left the office.

"But I love you!" Sally whispered fiercely between her teeth as she dialed the phone for the police.

"There you are, Mr. Jones. You may look in the mirror, if you wish."

Ben Hunter turned slowly to face the large mirror. The doctor stood behind his left shoulder, beaming. The face he saw in the mirror was pale but faintly pink. Like an infant's skin, he thought. The bold eyes that stared back at him were his own eyes, but everything else was changed.

It was a new face.

"Not bad," Ben Hunter

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said objectively. "He's kind of plain looking, but that suits me fine, Doctor."

"It usually suits all the Mr. Joneses whose faces need changing. The legion of Joneses who visit me here desire anonymity. Don't you, Mr. Jones?"

"Yeah," Ben Hunter said dryly. "I'll bet there are a hundred thousand Joneses here in New York."

"At least," the doctor beamed. "I don't ask why. I never ask my patients why."

"This one wouldn't tell you."

"Did it ever occur to you," demanded the doctor, "that I'm something like God in my work? I create a new face for you, Mr. Jones. A new face and it's my decision whether you will be handsome or ugly, scarred or smooth-skinned, pink or tan—"

"How much do I owe you?" Ben Hunter asked.

"Three thousand dollars, Mr. Jones."

"That's high."

"But worth it, don't you think?"

Ben Hunter shrugged. "I'll pay you. It was important to me to have my face changed."

"It always is important. I must remind you, however, that fingerprints often constitute a danger. I have a colleague who, for twice the fee I get, will tape your fingers to your chest for a period of several months, grafting chest-skin to your fingertips and thus obliterating the identifying prints. Unfortunately, the operation is inevitably reversible, but the patient is usually vouchsafed two or three years of true anonymity. Shall I contact my friend for you?"

"Not me," Ben Hunter said. "I'm not hiding from the cops. I have other reasons for wanting a face-lifting."

"When can I expect your check?"

"You're a curious son-of-a-bitch," Ben Hunter said. "You'd like a personal check, wouldn't you? The name Jones must bother you. I'll pay cash, Doctor."

"As you wish. But when will you pay?"

"Right now," said Ben Hunter, and took the money from his billfold.

Ten minutes later he was on the street. Within the hour, he ate a large meal in one of New York's most exclusive restaurants. The muscles of his new face felt stiff and strange, but no worse than he might expect them to feel after a bad sunburn. By the time he returned to Cen-

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ter City, everything would be fine.

And, for the time being at least, Ben Hunter had disappeared. He wondered if it would be permanent. He did not know yet. The face-lifting had been necessary, though, for two reasons. First there was his wife, Mary. Separation or divorce were always possible, of course. But messy. Time-consuming. This way, he had simply vanished. Mary could think anything she wanted to think. Of course, since she loved him, she would be frantic with worry for many months. She would get over it gradually, though. People always got over those things.

Am I immoral? wondered Ben Hunter. No, he wasn't immoral. He was amoral. He had nothing to do with 20th Century morality. He existed apart from it. He neither condemned it nor condoned it—he smiled when he remembered those words—he simply had nothing to do with it.

The second reason he had needed the face-lifting had to do with what he had told Merrill Pierce. He was going to find the killer whose place he had taken in the death house. Actually, it had nothing to do with revenge. What did revenge matter to him? He was happy; he was not vindictive by nature. Rather, he was completely indifferent. Nothing was further from his mind than revenge.

But the challenge of it, of finding the guilty man, of confronting him, of revealing his own—Ben Hunter's—identity! For here was a man whose life was at stake, a man whose dark secret had almost sent another to die in his place. A man who would fight for his life.

A challenge, Ben Hunter thought.

He had to change his face. It was very important. This way, as he wound his web about the killer, he could do so without arousing suspicion. He would be careful not to arouse suspicion until he was ready to pounce upon the man. Figuratively, of course. The police? He wasn't sure, but didn't think he would ever call the police. This was personal. This had nothing to do with the police. The police would spoil it.

Ben Hunter purchased a powerful Magnum .357 automatic pistol in a downtown hockshop and took the next plane from New York International Airport for Center City. The two stewardesses on the big DC-7 remarked afterwards that they had never

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seen such a genuinely gay, happy-go-lucky passenger.

On the northwestern outskirts of Center City, Birch Heights with its well-manicured lawns, carefully tended copses of silver birch trees, liberal sprinkling of swimming pools and large, predominantly Georgian houses, was Center City's most coveted residential address. And Birchview Drive, a broad, slowly meandering avenue on the western edge of the Heights and bordering on a forest of native birch, was to Birch Heights what Birch Heights was to the metropolis of Center City.

It was to an address on shady Birchview Drive that Ben Hunter made his way on a warm late summer day in a car he had rented under the name of Harry Anderson in the Center City U-Drive-It agency. Ben Hunter parked in front of the house and heard a dog barking from some place behind the large triple garage. The deep lawn rolled slowly up from the street in three gradual terraces so that the house itself, large and Georgian with a pillared portico out front, was a good dozen feet above street level. There were three low flights of red brick steps leading to the portico and the front door.

It was supposed to impress you, Ben Hunter thought as he went up the walk and began climbing the stairs. It must have cost a small fortune to raise the acre and a half of the Wilder property a dozen feet or so above ground level. It had been done to impress you—and impress you it did.

Ben Hunter took a deep breath and lifted the ornate door-knocker. It was wrought iron and brass and almost as large as his face. He remembered David Wilder's wife from the trial. A tall angular girl with hair like cascading copper. Her face said it. Her beautiful face. I accuse. I accuse this man. This murderer. He killed my husband. Her beautiful face.

It was the first time Ben Hunter had felt anything like fear since his transformation.

Every other shred of evidence had been circumstantial, even the motive. He and David Wilder had had a violent argument. He had accused Wilder of welching on a forty-thousand-dollar transaction. Wilder had denied it publicly, had denied it in writing. The firm of *Merrill Pierce and Hunter* had brought suit against the

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manufacturer and had lost the case. Libel. It wasn't libelous, the court ruled. For a few weeks Ben Hunter was a laughingstock in the highest social circles of Center City. On Birch Heights. But that isn't reason to kill a man, his defense counsel had said. He was seen in the neighborhood, by three people. Yes, he admitted, he had been in the neighborhood. On business. To call on Horace Blandings, three houses down on the other side of the street. Was Blandings in? The testimony came flooding back now as Ben Hunter lifted the door-knocker. No, Blandings hadn't been in. He couldn't understand it. They had had an appointment. Blandings hadn't called to cancel it. No one was at home, no one could testify that he had gone calling on Blandings that night.

His fingerprints had been on the murder weapon, a heavy black iron poker. Of course his fingerprints were on it. He and Mary had visited the Wilders the night before the murder. To bury the hatchet. There was a fire. He remembered stoking it once or twice while Wilder fixed the drinks, while Wilder was on the telephone.

At that point, the testimony stopped making sense. For Frances Wilder had testified that the hatchet-burying get-together had been a failure. Which wasn't true.

"Bury the hatchet?" she had said at the trial. "Mr. Hunter didn't act like he wanted to bury the hatchet."

He had jumped from his seat at that, but the defense lawyers had restrained him. Liar! Beautiful liar! But why? Why? Afterwards, when counsel had summed up, it was feared for three days a hung jury might result from the confusing testimony. But on the fourth day they brought in their verdict, a verdict which finally culminated in the point toward which every word of testimony had inexorably climbed: "Ben Hunter," the judge had said, "you shall be taken from here to a place prescribed by law and then, at a time suitable to the citizens of this state, you shall be hung by your neck until you are dead."

And he would have been, Ben Hunter thought, except for Mr. Smathers.

He shrugged, shook the cobwebs from his brain and let the door-knocker fall. Frances Wilder, he thought. She lied. To protect someone? To protect herself?

The door opened.

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"Yes, sir?" the maid said.

"I would like to see Mrs. Wilder. Mrs. Frances Wilder?"

"May I have your name, sir?"

"Anderson, Harry Anderson. I'm from one of the late Mr. Wilder's insurance companies."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Anderson. Come right in and wait in the sitting room."

Ben Hunter walked into the cool dark hallway, then through it to the sitting room, which was larger than most living rooms. He found several decanters of whiskey and a pressure bottle of soda. He fixed himself a rye and soda and smoked a cigarette. Then he heard footsteps in the hall, brisk but light. A woman. It would be Frances Wilder, of course. He felt a momentary uneasiness about his changed face. Would it deceive her? He smiled. It would. He thought it would even deceive his own wife.

"Mr. Anderson?" Frances Wilder said.

She wore white. In some countries, Ben Hunter found himself thinking, white was mourning color. She looked beautiful in white. She was tanned and her hair was long, hanging well below her shoulders. In high heels, she was almost as tall as Ben Hunter. The white dress fit her sheath-tight and her eyes said she knew it and wanted it to fit her that way and wanted men to see it fit her that way.

"How do you do, Mrs. Wilder?" Ben Hunter said. She offered him her hand. She had a firm, almost mannish handshake. She was a cool one, he thought. Very cool.

"Insurance, the girl said."

"That's right, Mrs. Wilder."

"That's impossible," she said dryly. "Fix me a drink, please. Scotch and water."

He made the drink. He smiled and gave it to her. "Why is it impossible?"

"Because Horace Blandings handled all of my husband's insurance. Mr. Blandings lives down the block. He didn't tell me an inspector was coming. He'd know, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess he'd know."

"What do you want, Mr. Anderson? The drink is perfect, by the way. Thank you."

"You're sharp, Mrs. Wilder," Ben Hunter said. "I'm from a legal firm representing Mr. Ben Hunter. Our client wants us to prepare papers in a million-dollar suit against the State."

"That's interesting," Fran-

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ces Wilder said. "I thought Hunter had disappeared."

"Not really, Mrs. Wilder. While he feels he must sue the State, he doesn't want too much publicity. He's in hiding."

"Leaving his wife behind?"

"Our client's personal affairs needn't interest us, Mrs. Wilder. Now, since your testimony was crucial at the murder trial—"

"My testimony is available in the transcripts of the trial, Mr. Anderson," she said coldly. "You still haven't told me what you want."

"If the State coerced you in any way—"

"How dare you, Mr. Anderson. I testified under oath."

"Mr. Hunter insists that his relations with your husband the night before the murder were very cordial, more cordial than he had expected. You see the position that puts you in."

"It doesn't put me in any position. It all came out at the trial. Hunter lied. Hunter perjured himself. It's understandable, when a man is trying to save his own life. Good day, Mr. Anderson."

"But I—"

"Really, if you have anything else to say, I suggest you see my lawyer." She smiled coolly. "The same Mr. Blandings, down the block. You can find his number in the city phone directory. Now I'm serious, Mr. Anderson. Good day."

Shrugging, Ben Hunter turned toward the hallway. He had not expected anything on his first try. She had accepted him as a lawyer for Ben Hunter, and that was something. He would be back. He walked out into the hallway.

And the door-knocker slammed against the oak panel of the door.

The maid drifted by Ben Hunter into the hallway. He watched as she opened the door, her figure in the starched uniform silhouetted against the bright afternoon light. He heard her say, "Yes, sir, Mr. Blandings. Come in, Mr. Blandings. Mrs. Wilder is in."

Blandings. The lawyer. The insurance man. The near neighbor. Who hadn't been home on the fateful night. Who had been—where?

"Horace," Frances Wilder said from behind Ben Hunter. "Won't you come in?"

Blandings nodded curtly at the man in the hallway, a man he apparently had never seen before. On impulse, Ben Hunter turned around and followed

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him back into the sitting room.

"How dare you!" Mrs. Wilder said. "I told you to leave."

"Killing two birds with one stone," Ben Hunter told her pleasantly. "I wanted to see Mr. Blandings for my client, anyway."

"Really, I think you had better go."

"Is this man bothering you?" Blandings demanded. "Do you want me to throw him out?"

Ben Hunter looked at the tall, slender lawyer. "You can't," he said softly. "So don't try."

Frances Wilder shrugged. "What do you want?"

"Blandings," Ben Hunter said, "on the night before the murder, Mrs. Wilder testified that her husband and my client, Mr. Hunter, were still hostile to one another. That was a lie. I'd like to know if you, as her lawyer, told her to testify that way."

"See here—" Frances began.

Blandings' face remained impassive.

"On the murder night," Ben Hunter went on quietly, "when Mr. Hunter called at your home on routine investment business, Mr. Blandings, you were not at home. Yet you had an appointment."

"I don't remember any appointment," Blandings said. He seemed a shade less confident now. He looked at Mrs. Wilder, his eyes saying: who is this man?

"There was an appointment," Ben Hunter repeated. "It was crucial. It gave my client a reason to be in the neighborhood."

"He was here because he killed my husband," the woman said.

"I know that isn't true," Ben Hunter said. "I'm beginning to think you should know it, too. Blandings, who were you protecting?"

"Get out of here before I throw you out," Blandings threatened a second time.

"I didn't get it at first. It didn't make sense."

"And you 'get it' now?" Frances Wilder mocked him.

"Maybe. I have no real proof. I have a hunch, is all. But it fits. Blandings wasn't home that night, but was supposed to be. Hitting a man with a poker is not a woman's way of killing. Too messy. Takes a lot of strength, despite the poker's weight, to make a depressed skull fracture. It's a man's way. Your way, Blandings."

"Call the police, Horace,"

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Mrs. Wilder said. "They'll take care of this madman."

Ben Hunter moved between them and the telephone. He said, "It was all planned, wasn't it? It didn't happen on the spur of the moment. You decided on it together. Mrs. Wilder testifying I didn't hit it off smoothly with her husband. That I was still ripping mad. Blandings making an appointment with me, then not keeping it. Arranging it so I would be seen in the neighborhood. Even the night before, Mrs. Wilder. It was already planned. Because *you* told Ben Hunter to stoke the fire. You did, Mrs. Wilder. I remember that now."

Suddenly the beautiful, high-cheekboned face drained of color. "*You* remember it? How do you remember it, Mr. Anderson? Who are you?"

"I remember," he repeated softly.

"There was something about your voice," Mrs. Wilder said. "I thought there was something—"

Blandings said, "This man is—"

"Ben Hunter!" Frances Wilder gasped. "But his face . . ."

"I can't say why you did it," Ben Hunter went on. "Love? Are you in love with each other? Money? He probably carried a lot of insurance with you, Blandings. Didn't he?"

"We have nothing to fear from the police," Blandings said with a sneer. "You can't prove anything you say."

"Give him some money if he wants it," Mrs. Wilder said. "Make him go away, Horace."

"You know, I think you're right about the police," Ben Hunter said. "There's no proof. Nothing but some sound intuition. But it's enough for me. It's all I need as a starter. I'll find proof."

Mrs. Wilder was very pale. She leaned against Blandings for support. Her mouth had gone slack, her eyes were glazed over. She said, very softly, "Don't let him leave, Horace."

"But that's ridiculous," Blandings told her. "He can't prove a thing."

"Look at him, Horace. He knows. He knows."

"It's going to be all right. Keep calm."

"No, Horace. If you don't do something, I will."

"Now, Frances."

"Matilda!" she screamed. "Get Brindle!"

"Frances, use your head."

"You see, I wasn't fooling."

Ben Hunter heard the dis-

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tant sound of barking. It came closer. It was the same dog he had heard earlier. Somewhere in the rear of the house, a door opened. The barking was much closer now, inside the house. A massive-chested buff-and-black boxer charged into the room, pawed the carpet, the ugly face swinging slowly on the thick neck, the tiny eyes roving the room, the black jaws apart.

Mrs. Wilder pointed at Ben Hunter. "Get him," she said. "Get him, Brindle!" she screamed.

"You can't settle it like this," Blandings said, and moved in front of the boxer as it charged. The animal leaped, growling. Its powerful forepaws brushed Blandings aside, sent him spinning toward the wall. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Wilder began to laugh.

Ben Hunter was clawing for the Magnum .357 in the shoulder holster he wore when the boxer, a growling mass of buff fury, bore him to the floor. He felt the hot, slavering jaws at his throat, wondered why they did not close. Time seemed incredibly suspended as he reached into his holster, withdrew the Magnum, pressed it against the boxer's great chest, pulled the trigger twice.

The animal leaped. It whimpered once, turned over and died.

Ben Hunter got to his feet unsteadily. He looked at the Magnum. Two shots? It felt warm in his hand. He remembered firing only twice, but he examined the magazine quickly and found it to be empty. Excitement, he thought. The heat of the moment. The boxer's body was probably riddled.

Horace Blandings and Frances Wilder were on the floor. Mrs. Wilder's head rested in a pool of blood, the copper hair matted with it. Blandings' shirt was stained with red.

"They're dead," someone said.

Ben Hunter whirled, saw Mr. Smathers. "You," he said.

"Yes. I."

"You killed them?"

"I am unarmed. *You* killed them, Hunter. Of course, I may possibly have influenced you—"

"But why? Why?"

"I still laugh when I think of the assumption you made. Convicted for a crime you never committed, you decide to lead a completely immoral life, if you ever go free. I free you, so you immediately as-

(Concluded on page 130)

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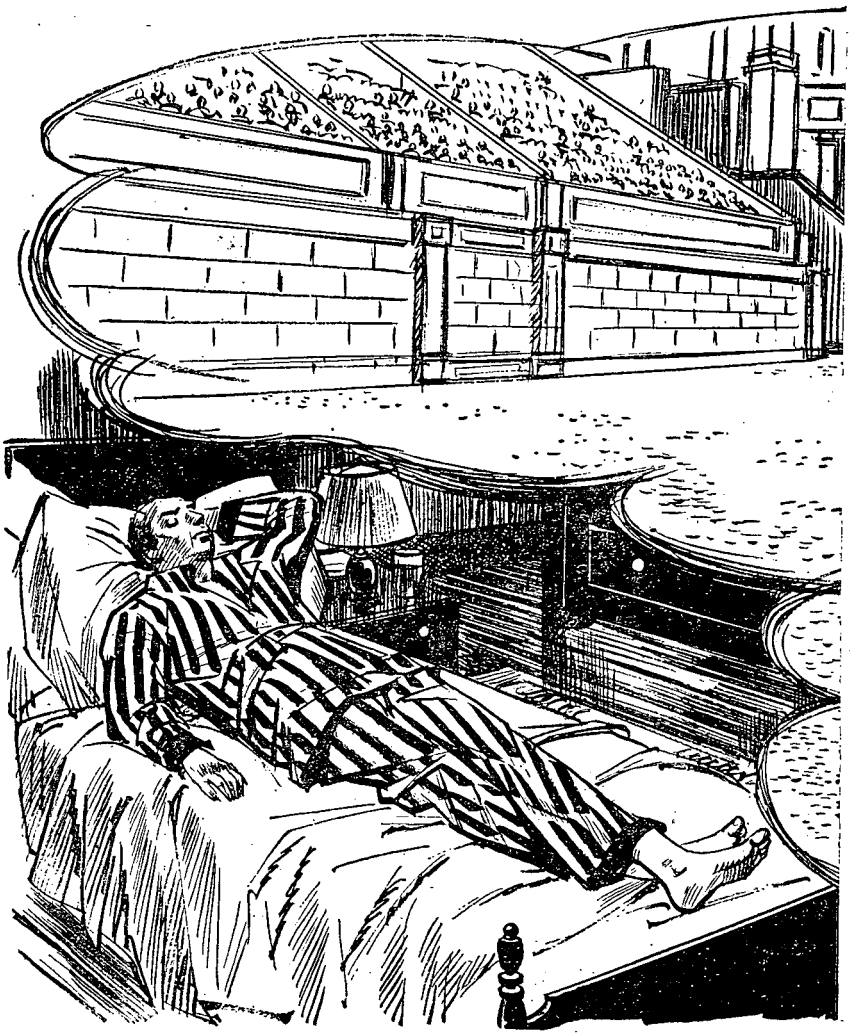
BETWEEN TWO



Was he asleep in his lonely bed or . . .

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WORLDS

By MILTON LESSER

. . . was he fighting for his life in the Past?

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

To the world of today he was Jason Weatherby, a mild-mannered little bank clerk. But to the world of long ago —ah, there he lived as the most heroic figure of the Golden Age! Only . . . which of these two lives was the real one? Which lovely girl the dream?

JASON awoke.

There was the smell of brine, there was the great heaving rise and fall of a small ship at sea. Wind-driven spray beat against his cheeks and somewhere nearby was the chord-plucked music of a lute. The only other sound, except for the slap-slap-slapping of the waves against the prow, was the steady rhythmic creak of oarlocks.

Jason smiled without opening his eyes. No, he thought. I am not awake. I am dreaming again.

Dreaming? But it had never been this real before. Every night Jason would read the tales of wonder from the ancient mythology books. His favorite was the *Quest of the Golden Fleece,* the story of the first long sea voyage, a perilous journey in uncharted waters, undertaken a generation before the Trojan War by the greatest heroes in Greek Mythology. Jason would fall asleep reading of the Argonauts and sometimes dreamed of them with a fierce envy.

He kept his eyes tight shut, unwilling to break the spell. And he heard a voice saying:

"The *Argo* is a fine ship, the finest ever, its hull of cypress wood and the interior fittings of stone-pine and plane wood. And we have a fine crew assembled, don't we, friend Orpheus?"

The lute was plucked again. "Yes," said Orpheus. "That's true, Hercules."

"Far to the uncharted east we sail," said Hercules. "Where no man has gone before, in a stout galley with a hand-picked crew. But we'll never get back alive." Hercules spat contemptuously. "Our luck to be saddled with a leader who's not right in the mind."

"Quiet," said Orpheus, plucking a new melody from his lute. "He may hear you."

"What of it?" Hercules de-

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clared bitterly. "I say it now and I'll say it to his face. The heir to Athamas' throne is an idiot who can neither think nor speak, yet we must follow him and obey."

"He's very handsome," a woman's voice said.

"Handsome!" Hercules, in exasperation, mimed her tone. "Spoken like a true woman, Atalanta."

Orpheus strummed a quick martial melody on his lute. "But a woman the Argonauts can be proud of, Hercules," he said. "A woman strong as a man and gifted with sword and spear but still beautiful."

"You'll make me blush," Atalanta said. "Anyway, I think he is very handsome."

"But his mind is clouded."

"Luckily for you, Hercules," Atalanta retorted. "Look at him, at Jason sleeping there. With a sound mind he would be your equal in prowess."

"An idiot," Hercules insisted.

The dream had never been this real before, Jason thought. He opened his eyes slowly, tentatively, ready to shut them at once if the four walls of his furnished room impinged on his vision. Instead, he saw Hercules' broad muscular back and Orpheus squatting cross-legged with his lute and the woman Atalanta, standing wind-whipped in the prow of the ship, very tall and very fair and formed like the Greecian demigoddess she was.

"Hello," Jason said shyly.

Hercules whirled around, his craggy face showing disbelief. "He speaks!"

Atalanta's eyes, as she turned to face Jason, were green as the sea is green. With a glad cry she ran toward him, but Orpheus stood up, shook his head and restrained the impetuous girl with a hand. "He's uttered single words before, Atalanta, but it is even as Hercules said. His mind is under a cloud, a curse of the usurper king. It's ironic, is it not? When we Greeks finally get the chance to seek the Golden Fleece which rightfully is ours, we are led by an idiot sent to meet his death in the unknown east so a usurper king may keep his throne."

"Jason was not always under this curse!" Atalanta cried. "I knew him as a child, and a finer boy never lived in Greece. But now—"

"So I'm on the Argosy," Jason said, waving a hand before his eyes to see if the vision would remain.

"He understands," Atalanta

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said tremulously. "He understands."

"Wait," said Hercules. Then he addressed Jason: "Who are you?"

"I am Jason—" *Jason Weatherby,* he was going to say, but with a second glad cry Atalanta came to him and kissed his cheek with her soft lips. She was tall, almost as tall as Jason, and she wore a warrior's garb. Her skin was white as the marble quarried from Pentelecus in rock-bound Attica. Her breasts were high and firm and her eyes brimmed with tears as she looked deep into Jason's face. Jason smiled at her. His heart was suddenly a wild thing, pounding against his ribs. I am Jason, he thought. Not Jason Weatherby, but Jason the hero. I am strong, strong as this man Hercules, but I have the mind of Jason Weatherby and although this is wonderful, I am afraid. As Jason Weatherby I am five-foot-five, a hundred-twenty pounds. I would barely reach this girl's chin . . .

"Where are you?" Hercules boomed, new hope in his voice.

"On the Argo in quest of the Golden Fleece," Jason answered promptly. "In the Euxine Sea."

"You see?" Atalanta cried joyously. Then all the other fabled heroes were gathering about him, smiling, thumping his back, congratulating him, talking of the curse which had lifted suddenly from his mind like a night-fast storm cloud dissipated by the morning sun's warmth. There was Peleus, who Jason knew would one day sire Achilles, that greatest of Greek heroes. There were Castor and Pollux, the twins.

Castor said: "With Jason to lead in quest of the Fleece, we have a chance."

"A splendid chance," agreed Orpheus, taking up his lute and strumming a wild happy melody on it.

That night they put into shore, as was the custom of old, and they feasted the return of Jason's sanity. There were fish from the Euxine Sea and a wild boar, roasted whole, which Castor and Pollux brought down with their arrows not three stadia from the rugged shore. There was much singing and libations poured to the gods in thanksgiving and some which were not poured on the white sands but down dry gullets instead. And there was Atalanta—Atalanta who would not leave Jason's side, who sang to him as Orpheus played his lute, who stroked his hair and

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thrilled to his kisses for they both had drunk their share of the heady pramnian wine.

"My Jason," she said, and together in the bright leaping firelight they watched the games and the races and the wrestling match in which Peleus bested first Pollux and then Castor, and then as the firelight waned and there was drowsy talk of the days ahead and their quest and more wine and a boastful but friendly challenge from Peleus; half drunk now, Jason found himself all at once wrestling with Peleus and in a few moments had pinned him on the sand, then returned to Atalanta, hardly sweating, his muscles like steel, and they slept there on the sand near the dying fire, innocently, in each other's arms.

In the morning as they prepared to get the Argo underway, there was a great flapping of wings overhead and a raucous cawing, screeching challenge flung down at them from the bright blue sky, and Orpheus cried:

"The harpies!" He plucked a single clarion note on his lute, let it fall and grasped instead the hilt of his sword. "Ungirt your swords," he added unnecessarily, for the heroes were already preparing to meet the winged, hook-beaked creatures which dwelled here on the coast of the Euxine Sea and, when they could, devoured men alive.

Jason's sword flashed a song of death that morning, leaping and singing and weaving a net of gleaming steel about himself and Atalanta. Their blood reddening the sand, the harpies fell, wings severed, feather breasts spitted. And then Atalanta said. "Behind you, Jason. Behind you!"

He whirled, saw the harpy, half again as big as a man, skimming low over the sand. He lifted his sword, suddenly, unexpectedly horrified because this was thrilling, this was what he had always dreamed about to make the humdrum life he led more palatable but this was also dangerous, this was how a man might die . . .

He held the sword on high, waiting, but he did not strike. Atalanta screamed again, and he thought he saw Hercules lumbering across the sand toward them. The harpy's beaked face, the hideous eyes, blurred toward him. The beak snapped open, fastened on his shoulder, slicing through the leather armor he wore——

Jason awoke, sweating, in bed. He felt weak and giddy,

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smiling foolishly at the image of Jason Weatherby in the mirror at the head of the room, the image, gaunt-cheeked and wide-eyed, looking back at him in the first gray light of dawn. A dream, he thought. Exhilarating, but thank God it was no more than a dream.

The smile faded from his lips abruptly. He felt the pain and wetness in his shoulder. With trembling fingers, he slipped off his pajama jacket and saw the blood, bright red, where the harpy's beak had struck.

II

"DON'T I get to stretch out on a couch or something?" Jason asked the psychiatrist with a shy smile.

Dr. Strill shook his gray head. "That won't be necessary on your first visit," he said. "We more or less have to get acquainted with you and your problem. Have you anything more to add? I mean, aside from that very vivid dream you just told me about?"

Instead of replying, Jason removed his jacket and shirt, baring scrawny shoulders and a concave chest. His left shoulder was covered with a large bandage. "It took seven stitches," he said, his lips trembling.

Dr. Strill nodded. "That's not as uncommon as you might believe, Mr. Weatherby. To you, the dream was very real. Part of your mind, you see, wanted it to be real. You wanted to live the sort of life your namesake led, three thousand years ago. Jason and the Golden Fleece, Mr. Weatherby. What man, in his secret heart, doesn't want to find the Golden Fleece?"

"Yes, but—"

"Let me finish, please. But you're a product of the Twentieth Century. You take for granted the comforts of your life and the comparative safety of living here in New York, with the benefits of Twentieth Century culture all around you. One part of your mind, Mr. Weatherby, wants to be the hero Jason, but another part of your mind rebels, is afraid. Ambivalence, you see? It is quite possible that the frightened part of your mind, determined that the dream should not recur, inflicted that wound. Do you have a history of sleep-walking?"

"No," said Jason, with firm emphasis.

"There is, of course, always a first time. Still sleeping, you went to the kitchen, took out a knife, inflicted the wound

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yourself. Determined, you see, to stop the dream at all costs."

"I live alone in a furnished room, Doctor. There is no kitchen. No knife."

"Then you inflicted it some other way. I am sure—"

"Doctor, am I losing my mind?"

"Now, Mr. Weatherby. Calm down. The results of your ink-blot test were perfectly normal. Extremely normal, I might add. You're as sane as I am."

"I mean, split personality or something—"

"Nonsense. How old are you, Mr. Weatherby?"

"I'm thirty-six."

"Married?"

"No.

"You see now? That could explain the girl Atalanta, too. She's strong as an Amazon, you say, but unlike an Amazon, she's beautiful. A man in your position would dream of a woman like that, especially if the alter-ego of your dream were still stronger. You wouldn't necessarily want a shinking violet type of woman, to protect. You'd want a companion to share your great adventure. It all fits."

"But, Doctor, what am I going to do? I know I shouldn't hope that dream will return, but I—at least part of me—wants it to."

"You've been reading mythology, you say? It began like that?"

"Yes."

"Then my advice—"

"Dr. Strill, if you tell me to stop reading those books, I'm afraid I won't listen. It's my only joy in life . . ."

"That's exactly what I *won't* tell you to do. You'll never conquer this illusion by hiding from it. Face it, Mr. Weatherby. Go home tonight and read those myths. Convince yourself they are nothing but that—stories, perhaps wonderful stories, but fantastic and impossible nevertheless. I suggest, however, that once you begin to understand this, you go out at night. Drink occasionally, Mr. Weatherby. Do you drink?"

"Why, no."

"You ought to try it. And be with people. Join a gym. Take up a hobby, perhaps. Something which will get you outside, like photography. You must learn to live in the real world. You must learn to . . ."

Dr. Strill's voice droned on and on, but now Jason was no longer listening. If he stared straight ahead, not at the psychiatrist but through him, he could almost imagine he was looking at Atalanta again, or

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sleeping with her in his arms as the firelight died on the far coast of the Euxine Sea while Orpheus strummed his lute. The wound in his shoulder throbbed dully with pain, but almost he found himself enjoying the sensation. For he would never believe that the wound was self-inflicted. He knew now, all at once, it had been a mistake making this appointment with Dr. Strill. The wound proved it. He might accept everything the doctor said—even the impossibility of Atalanta whom, he suddenly knew, he loved—except for the wound. The wound was real and had been made by the beak of a harpy swooping low across the sands on the shore of the Euxine Sea.

Jason shook hands with Dr. Strill automatically. He made an appointment for next week but knew he would never keep it. He returned the doctor's smile and left the office, already counting the hours until he could return home to his dream. For he knew, without knowing how he knew, that the dream would come again.

Dream?

But which was dream-world and which real world? "Atalanta," he murmured. And the psychiatrist's receptionist looked at him.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, it was nothing."

Atalanta. She alone was real. Nothing else mattered. Nothing. Tonight, he thought. Tonight if I go to bed with my Greek mythology and read it as before, as last night, if I recreate the spell—if spell it was—I will see her again. I will see her again and smell the fragrance of her skin and touch her. That was real. Nothing else mattered.

I will see her—but face death with the brave Argonauts, he thought, shuddering. It was one thing to read about a world without automobiles and canned food and policemen on every corner and electricity and psychiatrists to tell you nothing was wrong, and quite another to find yourself thrust suddenly into a primitive world where a man would survive if his blade were sharp and his sword arm strong and if, in battling across the uncharted eastern sea with a band of legendary heroes, he could maintain his position of leadership . . .

He was sweating when he reached the street. Don't think about it, he told himself. Think about Atalanta.

"Hey, you!" someone called. "Hey, now—"

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He looked up. He heard a screeching sound. A cop was bellowing at him from the curb. A big semi-trailer lurched to a stop, its front bumper inches from his hip.

He smiled at the cop, who was scowling. The truck driver leaned out of the cab and shook his fist. Jason shrugged and crossed over toward the other side of the street. People were looking at him. He blinked his eyes. The sounds of the traffic roared in his ears.

III

THE traffic roared in his ears.

Not traffic. Water, swirling and eddying and rushing among rocks, foaming and frothing, the rocks, keen-fanged, waiting to crush the Argo.

"All right," Hercules said. "All right, you heard me. If we get through these Clashing Rocks alive—which I doubt—we are going to leave Jason on the farther shore. A man under a curse like that, he's bad luck."

"You saw how normal he was until the harpies came that morning," Atalanta said seriously.

"But now look at him. Cloud or demon or whatever, it has returned to blanket his mind. Well, look at him."

Jason opened his eyes and smiled at Atalanta. She wasn't looking at him, though. Her face was in profile and she was scowling at Hercules. Castor and Pollux were seated nearby, staring ahead at the foaming waters. Orpheus, grim-lipped, strummed his lute to keep time for the banks of rowers. Jason almost imagined he could smell the rowers' fear as their great oars rose and dipped, carrying the Argo toward the Clashing Rocks. He shuddered, then grinned at his baseless terror.

Wasn't it written in mythology? The Argo got through the Symplegades, the Clashing Rocks, safely.

Again he shuddered. The mythology said nothing about Jason's mind enfeebled under a curse, and nothing about Jason Weatherby, late of New York, U.S.A., inhabiting Jason's body with his own mind.

"Atalanta," he said.

She turned, faced him. Hercules walked stiffly to the prow, muttering an oath.

"The fever," Atalanta said, "and the muteness—gone, Jason?"

He nodded. He watched Peleus and Hercules talking in low tones. He couldn't hear the words, but from the way

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Peleus was looking at him and at Atalanta, he knew they were the subject of the conversation.

"Hold her steady!" Hercules bellowed suddenly, his voice booming above the crash of the waves. "Up oars, Orpheus!"

Orpheus gave a final pluck to his lute, a high note. The rowers instantly shipped their long oars, but even so, three or four in the lower bank were sheared off like matchsticks by the jagged rocks.

"Do we have a passage?" Castor called.

Hercules shrugged his massive shoulders. Peleus shook his head. Abruptly, Jason found himself striding forward swiftly. He reached the slim prow of the Argo and shouldered his way between Hercules and Peleus, shading his eyes from the sun and peering ahead. "Left," he called over his shoulder. "Left bank, Orpheus."

Orpheus, however, did not strum his lute as a signal for the rowers. "Left, by Zeus!" Jason cried in a terrible voice. "Unless you want to kill us all."

Orpheus merely looked at Hercules.

"I see nothing," Hercules insisted. "No channel, despite what this madman is hollering."

In another moment, Jason knew, they would spit themselves on the rocks unless they turned. He didn't have time to run back to Orpheus, grab the lute and give the rowers their signal. This, then, was how it would end, drowning here in the Euxine Sea, trapped, perhaps for all time, in the sunken wreck of the Argo—

But Atalanta, who was not half a dozen feet from the reluctant Orpheus, plucked the lute from his hands and strummed the signal which brought the left bank of oars flashing up in the sunlight and dipping down, like the legs of a giant spider, into the white-capped waters.

The Argo veered. More oars were snapped in twain. A rower near the stern of the ship screamed horribly as his oar was shattered on the rocks, the shaft driven deep into his bowels, skewering him. But the Argo, finding the channel which Jason had somehow seen, floated serenely through the perilous passage. With a haughty word, Atalanta returned the lute to Orpheus, who shrugged and renewed the rowers' beat.

"Well?" Atalanta called her

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challenge to Hercules, still standing, carved of marble it seemed, in the prow with Peleus and Jason.

"A lucky accident," Hercules snapped. "He didn't know what he was doing. I go no further with a madman to lead me. Nor do Peleus and the Twins."

Peleus nodded his stubborn agreement but Castor and Pollux seemed undecided.

"We near Colchis, where King Aetes rules," Hercules went on. "Colchis, where King Aetes keeps the Golden Fleece. Either Jason shall not be aboard the Argo when we reach the Colchian shore, or Hercules. You may take your choice, my friends."

"And either Jason or Peleus," Peleus agreed. "I go no further with this cursed leader."

Hercules gave a signal to Orpheus, who not with words but the music of his lute told the rowers to beach the Argo on the desolate, wind-swept shore beyond the Clashing Rocks.

"If you give your ultimatum," Atalanta said as they approached land, "then I must give mine. The moment Jason leaves our company, Atalanta goes with him."

Smiling, Orpheus strummed a battle paen. *Up oars,* his lute said, and the Argo's prow nosed into the sand. Peleus leaped nimbly into the surf and waded to the sandy beach. All the other heroes followed him and the rowers moved off gratefully to the shade of a grove of pines which, on one end of the beach, grew almost to the water's edge.

Atalanta and Jason were the last to leave the ship. "Tell me," she said, "if Hercules challenges you to individual battle, will you accept?" She placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

They waded to shore together. Jason knew she was waiting for his answer, but he was silent. Would he accept. How could he accept? The very thought of it made his limbs weak with terror. Do battle with Hercules? Ask a man armed with a peashooter to take on the United States Army, he thought in despair. It would be the same. He, Jason Weatherby, would stand no better chance than that against the mighty Hercules.

But he wasn't Jason Weatherby. He was Jason, Captain of the Argo; Jason leading an expedition to Colchis to reclaim the Golden Fleece for Greece, and reclaiming it, win back his rightful king-

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dom, usurped in the Peloponnese when he was an infant. Jason, who could do battle with Hercules on even terms . . .

"My brother and I," Pollux was saying when they reached the firm sand at the edge of the tide, "are neutral. With the rest of you, we seek the Golden Fleece. We care not who accompanies us and who does not. We would like to point out, though, that there is strength in numbers."

"Against the wily King Aetes?" Hercules scoffed. "Strength in stealth and treachery, you mean. I won't be led by a madman."

"He is not mad," Atalanta said. "Now."

"Nor shipmate of a woman, if it comes to that," Hercules added.

"Have you decided?" Atalanta whispered to Jason.

He nodded. His tongue was thick. He couldn't trust his voice. He squeezed her hand once, then waited for Hercules to make the first move.

But Peleus moved first. Peleus lifted his spear and drove it, point first, into the sand at Jason's feet, the shaft quivering. "There is my challenge, Jason," he said.

"And after Peleus," Hercules roared, "if you get by Peleus, which you won't, you will find Hercules' spear at your feet."

Jason swallowed and took a deep breath. The sun was very hot on his shoulders and his left shoulder, where the harpy had bitten, throbbed. A soft wind brought the scent of pines to his nostrils. He said, "Then leave Peleus to the boys, Castor and Pollux, or to a woman. My spear is for Hercules."

So saying, he cast his own weapon at the feet of Hercules. The giant smiled his welcome of the challenge, but Peleus had turned pale. Smiling herself, Atalanta removed Peleus' spear from the sand and drove it into the ground at his feet.

"But a woman!" Castor gasped.

From a corner of his eye, Jason saw Atalanta closing with Peleus, the tall slender girl, lithe and very feminine, and the bronzed giant of a man. At once, he wanted to go to her aid, but found himself whirling suddenly to face Hercules' wild attack.

The only sound was the scuffling of feet on the sand and the battle paen of Orpheus' lute.

Homer should have been there, or Pindar, Jason found himself thinking in the swift split-second it took Hercules

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to launch his attack: the one to write in epic form of this struggle and the other to celebrate it with an ode. He blinked his eyes. Jason—Captain Jason of the Argo—would not think now of books. But Jason Weatherby—

Suddenly he felt himself borne upward, flung far across the wet sands. He landed with a splash in the water and heard Hercules' booming laugh as the giant came charging at him, kicking spray with his great-thewed legs. Jason dipped his hand underwater, brought it up with sand and sea-weed slime, hurled it at Hercules' face. The giant bellowed and swung wildly, a blow which—had it landed—would have broken Jason's neck. But he moved in under it swiftly and pumped his own fists to Hercules' superbly muscled torso. The giant grunted and came on, wrapping his thick arms around Jason's chest and squeezing. He felt the breath leave his body and knew in another moment his ribs would crack, the splintered ends of bone piercing his lungs.

He butted his head against Hercules' jaw, snapping the leering face back and away from him. He got both hands on either side of the giant's jaw, pushing. The muscled neck arched, the muscles bulged on Hercules' shoulders. But slowly the pressure on Jason's ribs was relaxed, and all at once, panting and giddy, he stood free.

Swiftly, his eyes took in the beach: Castor and Pollux, wide-eyed, watching the double-battle; Orpheus, a faint smile on his lips, plucking the notes of a paen to Ares, God of War, on his lute; Peleus and Atalanta circling each other warily; the rowers, straggling back in groups of two and three to watch the fray; and Hercules, charging at him again.

He met the wild charge calmly this time, knowing he would have to strike at bone to bring Hercules down, not doubling his fists but using the edge of his hands on the massive shoulders, on the square line of the jaw, across the bridge of the nose. Hercules sank to his knees, floundering in the shallow water, blood streaming copiously from his shattered nose. Jason brought his left leg up, smashing the knee against Hercules' deep chest. The giant flipped over on his back in the shallow water and Jason leaped at him, hands seeking his throat, forcing his head under, the eyes wide-staring through the swirling

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brine, beseeching him. Jason released the throat and as the face broke water crossed his right fist with all his strength at the exposed and vulnerable jaw. Hercules fell back and lay there without moving, the waves washing over his face.

"Here is your hero!" Jason cried contemptuously, the blood racing through his veins. He floundered up the beach toward Peleus and Atalanta, glimpsing Castor and Pollux sprinting into the water to drag out the unconscious Hercules.

"I'm coming, Atalanta," he said grimly, and stopped. The warrior-maid needed no help. She stood, a wild thing with the sea-wind in her hair, while Orpheus, for once without his lute, administered to the battered Peleus.

"You?" Jason gasped. "A woman—"

She spoke, smiling, and part of him heard her words, but part of him was thinking: you read about things like this, and that is very wonderful. But to live them? To live them with the battle paen ringing in your ears and the shadow of death hovering, to live them when the glory wilts before pain and violence and the threat of death? Was that what he wanted? What he really wanted? I don't know, he thought. I won't know—until we reach Colchis, King Aetes and the Golden Fleece.

"My father, Iasus," Atalanta was saying, smiling at Jason, "wanted a boy. When I was born he had me carried, naked and helpless, to a mountaintop. It is common enough. Some hunters found me, though, and raised me as one of them, teaching me use of spear and bow and how to fight as well. Teaching Atalanta that, and somehow, she was vouchsafed the strength of a man in the body of a woman. I don't know how this is so: Atalanta is before you; Peleus has felt her strength."

"Why do you speak of yourself like that?" Jason asked her. "You use your name, you say Atalanta, as if you were talking of someone else."

For an instant, Atalanta's beautiful face drained of all color, but then she smiled, shrugging. "It is nothing," she said, and would not talk of it further.

Presently, Hercules regained consciousness. He sat up, scowling darkly. His broken nose, bloated and swollen now, covered half his face. "I was beaten in fair fight," he said, not looking at Jason, "and so I must go. I take my leave of the Argo, Orpheus, but I tell

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you this: I shall reach Colchis by the overland route, perhaps before you do. And if in Colchis King Aetes wants to keep his Golden Fleece, I shall fight on his side if fight there is."

"But you're a Greek!" Castor shouted his disbelief.

"I am—Hercules." And the giant would say no more. He waited until Peleus was strong enough to accompany him, then set out silently across the sands toward the nearby copse of pines. Soon the two great figures were lost to sight.

Orpheus plucked a note of finality on his lute. "When the songs of our deeds are sung," he predicted, "they will not say Hercules left the Argo for this reason. And of Peleus? What will they sing of Peleus?"

Atalanta grinned. "Probably, they won't say he left the Argo at all. Perhaps they'll sing of him here on the fine cypress ship instead of Atalanta, for Atalanta is a maid, strong or not, and it is unseemly, is it not, for her to take his place aboard ship?"

Orpheus shrugged, laughing. "Ho! Rowers," he called. "Board ship."

Ten minutes later, with the sun-flashing oars leaving their invisible footprints on the surface of the water, they were underway again.

That night, to make up for the time they had lost and despite the superstitious protests of the rowers, they journeyed on without stopping. Jason was given the final watch before dawn and sat silently for a long time, waiting for the first faint gray gleam of dawn in the east, listening to the rhythmic creaking of the oarlocks. They could not stop this night, he knew, for Colchis was close—too close. It was important, it might be vital, that they reach Colchis ahead of Hercules and Peleus.

Starlight faded slowly, not to the first trace of dawn but to the final deeper darkness of night which ushers in the day. Jason sat, knees up, head propped on knee, listening to the music of the oars.

"Jason?" It was Atalanta's voice, softly. "I cannot sleep."

"I'm over here," he said, and heard her moving quietly toward him.

She settled herself down against him, resting her head on his other knee. He could feel her long silken tresses on his bare skin and all at once he wanted to reach out and press her to him, but he held back. She belonged to this

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world, she would one day belong to its legends which would be sung and read as long as there were voices to sing and eyes to read. But he? He was a changeling, an alien, adrift between worlds, neither belonging entirely to the one nor to the other.

"Atalanta," he said the music of her name.

"What is it, Jason? Your tongue is heavy, is it not? You would say something?"

"I—it is nothing."

"No. Tell me. Please tell me."

He could smell the faint musky perfume of her skin, feel the beat of her heart fluttering against his thigh. He stroked her hair and was silent.

"Free yourself of the thought, Jason."

"Atalanta, what do we actually know of the universe? What, in our ignorance, have we been able to see?"

"I don't understand."

"I am thinking of another world, a far world removed not in space but in time, a world which knows of this, our world, through legends and songs, a world where—"

"Your words are strange." Unexpectedly, he could feel her body going tense against him, as if, somehow, she were afraid to hear his words.

"I was thinking. It's nothing. I was trying to—well, trying to picture you, Atalanta, in that world." But how could that ever be? he mused, tormenting himself. Atalanta—a free, wild thing, the most beautiful woman he had ever known, but strong with the strength of a man, Atalanta in the Twentieth Century . . . The thought of it brought a smile to his lips.

"What do you know of such a world, Jason?" she asked. There was grave concern in her voice—and a suggestion of awe.

Instead of answering, he took her in his arms. They remained that way, breast to breast, while slowly the darkness fled before the new day, first gray, then pink in the eastern sky. The slaves were singing a sad ancient chant, their voices deep and far-away, swept up by the sound of the spraying surf as they plied their oars, steadily, without care, without hope, without dreams.

"Is my destiny the same?" Jason asked himself. No hopes, no dreams. Because this is what I thought I wanted, what my soul cried for, but I was wrong. I did not want Jason or the Argo—not even, I think, the Golden Fleece. But Atalanta. I wanted her.

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Not knowing it, all my life I wanted her. But to have her, in this wild hostile world, or to go back to sanity alone, without her . . . for surely Atalanta would feel trapped, would wilt and die hemmed in by civilization, like some exotic bloom drowned in concrete . . .

He kissed her, gently at first and then firecely and all his longing, all the pent up yearning for the world he had never known and now, knowing, did not want, and all his longing for what could never be with Atalanta, flowed from his lips in that kiss. And she returned it from the depths of her own passion—

"Atalanta," he murmured.

"Dawn!" the head oarsman shouted. "I see the Colchian coast!"

Castor and Pollux awoke together from their slumber and said, their vóices merging, "Colchis. And the Golden Fleece."

Jason stood up, walked with Atalanta to the Argo's prow. She lifted her arm, white as marble, and pointed toward the low pale fringe of green on the horizon. Together they heard the first waking notes of Orpheus' lute.

And something took possession of Jason, snapped him, magically, from his body, swept him far up and over the Argo so that it seemed a toy ship on an ocean painted, crawling like a midge toward the shore. He called out to it, lifted his arms. He saw the tiny figures below him, far below and out of reach rushing toward Jason in the prow of the toy Argo.

No! he pleaded. Not now. She needs me. Colchis—with no Hercules, no Peleus to share the burden, she needs me. Jason is a mindless hulk without me, but to reach the Golden Fleece and find it . . .

Something shook him, as a frail branch is shaken in a storm. He felt himself swept up in an eddy, engulfed, whirled down an infinite vortex—

And opened his eyes on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

IV

"WEATHERBY, I'm talking to you."

"Yes, Mr. Fairchild?"

Don't you like your position with us? You're not a teller, you know. A teller's work is automatic. You're head cashier of the bank. You have to think."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fairchild."

"Well, I caught three mistakes, three in one afternoon.

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How long have you been with us, Weatherby?"

"I—twelve years."

Now the bank's doors were closed and the day's final tallying was being done. Whitlock, the L-Z teller was watching them, a faint smile on his thin lips.. Whitlock had also been with the bank for an even dozen years. Whitlock was next in line for the cashier's job, if Jason were let go.

"Twelve years," Mr. Fairchild was saying. "A long time. I would hate to think the edge of enthusiasm has worn thin for you, Weatherby. In just eighteen more years you could be eligible for our pension plan. But eighteen years can be a long time."

"It won't happen again, sir."

"Well, see that it doesn't."

Last night. And the night before. And the night before that. He had tried. He had gone crazy with trying. But somehow, he had lost contact. Only a dream? It did not seem possible to him. Everything, everything might have been a dream—but not Atalanta.

He had been unable to return. He had done everything he could think of. The books. The drowsiness. Dim lights, so after a while the words faded, blurred, became indistinct. And he had slept silently, as if the slim, invisible, unthinkable strand which somehow connected him with Atalanta's world had been forever severed. Atalanta, he thought. Where are you now? In Colchis, where King Aetes, wily and cruel, reigns. Facing peril with the mute, mindless Jason beside you, unable to help, unable even to think. Atalanta . . .

"Weatherby!"

"Yes—yes, sir?"

"You sit there, mooning. Enthusiasm, man. Where is your enthusiasm?"

"Atalanta," he said aloud.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing."

But Mr. Fairchild looked at him contemptuously and crooked a finger in the eagerly watching Whitlock's direction. "Here you, Whitlock," he called. "Weatherby is ill. He'll take the rest of the afternoon off. Can you handle the cashier's desk?"

"Yes, sir," Whitlock fairly bleated. "Yes, *sir!*"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Weatherby," Mr. Fairchild said. "I'll expect a marked improvement."

Jason nodded numbly. Whitlock smiled condescendingly at him. It was almost a sneer. He wanted suddenly to strike Whitlock. He had all

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he could do to check himself. It was the other world, he thought. It was the way of Atalanta's world. It would solve nothing here.

He hurried from the bank, nodding at the door guards without seeing them.

Outside, a steady cold rain was falling. Jason walked two blocks, hardly knowing which way his legs carried him. Bar and Grill, a sign said. He walked inside, sat down. There was the smell of stale beer.

"Cheeseburger," he said. "No, make that whiskey. Any kind. A double."

He drank. He had another. He made little circles with the wet glass bottom on the surface of the table. He could feel the whiskey, warm in his stomach. It rushed through his blood to his head, clouding it, to his limbs, weakening them.

"'Nother," he mumbled. The barman looked at him, served the drink reluctantly. He drank it, and another. He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. He saw two Jasons—the pale, sunken chested bank cashier. The hero of the Argo. Two Jasons, side by side.

"Atalanta," he said. He picked up his shot glass and hurled it at the mirror. The glass shattered, long jagged cracks sundering his image but leaving the image of Jason, the Argo's captain.

"Hey, you!" the barman cried.

Jason leered at him, struck out feebly with his right fist. The barman caught it and twisted. Jason yelped. From somewhere, the barman got a sawed-off baseball bat and brandished it menacingly. When Jason, thoroughly drunk and thoroughly ornery, tried to hit him again, he caught the clumsy blow with his left hand and swiped at Jason's head with the baseball bat.

He swiped at air. He gawked.

Jason wasn't there. For a brief moment, the image of the other Jason remained in the shattered mirror. Then that, too, faded.

V

SOMEWHERE nearby, a fountain bubbled in a glade of pomegranate trees. He had a pomegranate in his hand, the seeds red as blood. He sat on a couch and became aware of the woman, gazing at him intently, a faint smile on her lips, lips red as the seeds of pomegranate, red as blood.

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The woman clapped her small delicate hands, and a krater of wine was brought. The woman was very beautiful, with hair like shimmering gold and pale limbs now revealed now concealed by the diaphanous mantle she wore as she approached him with the wine. But her face—her face was hard and cruel although the features were lovely.

"What cruel jests my father plays," she mused, talking as much to herself as to Jason. "You are as Adonis, but your mind is blighted." She came to him, lifted the wine to his lips. "Still, I must do my duty."

"Who are you?" Jason gasped.

She recoiled away from him, as if struck. "You speak!" she cried. "What trickery, what mockery . . ."

"I asked who you were."

"But how can this be? They told me you understood nothing. Nothing."

He drank the wine and waited for her answer. Instead of giving it, the woman came to him boldly and kissed his lips. The kiss, like wine, sent fire coursing through his veins. Had he not held Atalanta in his arms, the woman's kisses might have made him forget everything. But after Atalanta, what woman could touch him with her kisses?

She must have sensed it, for finally she leaned away from him and sighed. "I am Medea," she said, "daughter of King Aetes." Her eyes were filled with wonder, as if she still could not believe Jason had spoken. "My father said if I drank with you this night and loved you, if I saw that sleep did not come, you would fail in the tasks which await you tomorrow." She clapped a hand to her mouth, as if she had said too much.

Jason grabbed her slim arms and brought her back to the couch. "What tasks?" he demanded.

"You don't know? You remember nothing?"

"Is this place Colchis?"

"Colchis, yes. But I can tell you nothing."

"Where is Atalanta? Where are the Twins and Orpheus?"

"Safe enough, Jason. King Aetes wishes them no harm because they can do him no harm without you. But forget them, Jason. When I looked upon you, I said 'there is a man'— until I learned that your mind was under a dark cloud. But now—now . . ."

Desire flared in the woman Medea's eyes. She wanted to kiss him again. Her lips part-

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ed moistly. Her arms trembled. If I had not known Atalanta, Jason thought, my desire would match this woman's own. He stood up and hurled the wine cup away, shattering it on the tiled wall.

"I can't let you die tomorrow," she said softly.

"Then tell me."

"You came in quest of the Golden Fleece. My father, the King, proposed a contest, to which you agreed through the musician, who spoke for you. He did not want to but he had no choice, because King Aetes made it plain you all would have been put to death had you refused. Thus tomorrow, when the sun rises, you go to your doom."

Jason smiled. His Twentieth Century mind balked at her words. Going to his doom? For an ancient Greek it might be very real; if the doom were sufficiently horrible, it might turn his limbs to water. If my courage comes through ignorance, Jason thought, so what? It is still courage. "What is my doom going to be?" he said.

"Tomorrow, when the first rays of the sun make gold the eastern sky, you will attempt to yoke two wild bullocks and —should you succeed—you will then sow the dragon's teeth. But Jason, Jason! The bullocks are like no animals you have ever seen. They breathe fire. They—"

"I know about your bullocks," Jason said. He was almost going to say he read about them in his mythology books. And the dragon's teeth, he thought. You sowed them in soil which had been drenched with the blood of Prometheus, who first brought fire to mankind, and at once they sprouted.

They sprouted full-grown warriors, armed to the teeth . . .

"I am sorry," Medea said. "There is nothing I can do to stop the contest. I wish . . . I wish . . ."

"What do you wish?"

"If you somehow triumph and receive the Golden Fleece as your reward, I would give you another reward. Some men would think it greater. I would give you myself, Jason of Greece."

He said nothing. He looked at her and felt pity. Yes, he thought, she can have Jason. For if I am alive when the sun sets tomorrow, I am returning to my own world and unless the power which somehow draws me here is greater than I think, I shall not return. She can have Jason: the mindless Jason from the world of mythology.

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But, he knew, he would take Atalanta back with him.

She would tower over him, she would feel strange and alone and confined in his world but there was no preventing it. The real treasure was not the Golden Fleece, the real treasure was Atalanta. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that if he held her hand and willed himself back to the Twentieth Century, she would accompany him.

He would do it, he thought with bitterness, but she might hate him for it all the rest of her life. Still, life without Atalanta was utterly meaningless for him.

He felt pity for Medea, whose love he could not return. "Very well," he said, "Jason will take you back to Greece with him, if Jason lives." For wasn't it written that way in the mythologies? "Now, where are my friends?"

"You promise? You truly promise?" She sank to her knees before him, clutching his legs desperately. When he nodded she stood up and pointed through an archway. "They await you there," she said. "But my father, the King, believes—"

"Dismiss your servants," Jason told her. "Your father won't know the difference. Tell him you kept me here all night. Tell him we loved. Tell him what you want. I won't deny anything."

She looked like she wanted to kiss him again. "Would that it could have been true," she said, and watched him walk swiftly through the archway.

"You're here!" Atalanta cried a few moments later. "Oh, you're here! We didn't know what had happened to you. We only knew the sickness had returned to your mind, and . . ."

He silenced her lips with a kiss. Castor and Pollux grinned and left the room, but Orpheus remained with his lute, strumming a paen to love.

"Jason," Atalanta breathed tremulously. "How can it be that way with you? One moment you seem in full possession of your mind. The next—"

"It will never happen again," he vowed. "And Atalanta, listen to me. If I triumph tomorrow, if I yoke the bullocks and sow the dragon's teeth and defeat the warriors which will rise up from the blood of Prometheus, I shall ask you to accompany me somewhere—"

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"Anywhere, Jason. Oh, anywhere."

"To a world like none you have ever known."

"To the ends of the earth!"

"A world of strange conventions, a world that might crush you with its order and pattern—"

"Jason, your words are so strange, I might almost believe, if I dared—" Her voice trailed off.

"What might you believe?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. It's too much to hope for."

Orpheus plucked a final note from his lute. "I will leave you two lovers," he said.

Atalanta smiled. "No," she said. "Stay. I won't even kiss him this night. For Jason needs all his strength tomorrow."

Shrugging, Orpheus sought a new melody on his lute. Jason said, "Musician, listen to me. If we win tomorrow, your song of our deeds shall live forever."

"I am only a poor musician who—"

"Hear me. I ask you to sing of the Jason you know now, tonight. Sing of him and not of the poor sick Jason, the mindless Jason. Will you promise that?"

Orpheus nodded. "Who would want to hear a song of a madman?"

"Good," Jason said. "Then it's settled."

"Settled?" Orpheus laughed nervously. "If you yoke the bullocks, and if you sow the dragon's seed, and if you slay the warriors who will spring, full grown, from the furrows."

"I will," Jason vowed.

"But you're still forgetting something," Orpheus insisted. "Late this afternoon, the servants provided by King Aetes informed us that Hercules and Peleus arrived in Colchis. They had an audience with the King, and afterwards the King seemed very pleased."

Atalanta had turned very pale at his words, but Jason said, "We will worry about Hercules and Peleus after I conquer the spawn of the dragon's seed."

VI

IT WAS an enormous natural amphitheater in a small valley nestled between steep hills on which, tier on tier, the people of Colchis sat. Far away, Jason could see the royal box, draped with purple and the tiny crowned figure of King Aetes seated beside a smaller figure, his daughter Medea. The bullocks, Jason had ben told, would be released from a cavern under the

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hill. But first, as was the custom, he must pay his homage to the King.

He walked across the brown earth, conscious of the eyes of the multitude upon him. He walked slowly with the sun warm on his back and wondered if this early morning sun was the last he would ever see. The sky was a perfect blue and a warm wind swept down between the low shoulders of hills.

"King of Colchis," Jason said, reaching the royal box, "I salute you."

The crowd was still, expectant. The King, handsome in his regal robes, smiled down on Jason. Jason thought he would signal for the release of the fire-breathing bullocks, but the King lifted his hand for silence and said: "My daughter Medea and I have decided that you are to be granted help."

Jason frowned. Aetes would not actually help him, he knew. The King continued: The Princess Medea has suggested that your companion, Atalanta, shall undergo your trials with you."

"No," Jason protested. "I need no help." By the gods, he thought, I do need help, but I won't subject Atalanta to what I must face.

"I have spoken," King Aetes said. "It shall be as the Princess Medea suggested."

A horn blared its melancholy note across the amphitheater as Aetes raised the royal hand in signal. "Fool!" Medea whispered, leaning down from the royal box. "Think you I didn't know of the maid, Atalanta? Think you I did not know why my kisses did not capture you as they have captured other men? If you must go to your death, let the maid of Greece accompany you. If you survive, perhaps she will not. And if you both survive, there is present here today a Greek named Peleus who vows that your precious Atalanta shall not leave this amphitheater alive."

Jason was going to answer but became aware of a snuffling and bellowing behind him. Far across the arena, he saw the bullocks coming. They pawed the ground, heads down, their flaring nostrils spewing jets of flame as they galloped toward him.

"Jason!" Atalanta cried. Her voice was distant, and he saw her coming, sprinting in his direction from the far side of the arena, opposite the fire-breathing bullocks. She wore a crimson mantle which, even as she ran, she removed from her shoulders. Beneath

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it, she was all ivory loveliness in the sunlight and it took Jason several seconds, at this distance, to realize she was stark naked.

"Jason, wait! It's something I learned at Cnossus, in Crete. They call it bull-baiting. Jason!"

The snorting bullocks were two hundred yards off now—and closer. A hundred yards, breathing jets of fire . . .

A bold smile on her lips, Atalanta ran toward them, swirling the crimson mantle before her. She brought the mantle up and swept it down suddenly to one side, holding it out stiffly, the heavy cloth billowing in the hot wind. And both bullocks, pawing the ground with their fore-hooves, plunged toward the mantle, flank to flank, sweeping by Atalanta so close that Jason thought at first the nearer one had gored her with its terrible horns.

"Enough of . . . it," she panted, "bewilders them. In Crete it's the national sport, Jason. If I can tire them, if you can get the plow and the yokes and—"

Her words were lost in angry bellow as the bullocks came again. Jason ran to the twin yokes, half a hundred yards away, grasping the metal collars with the leather harnesses trailing. Vaguely he was aware of Atalanta, all grace and speed and fluid motion, pirouetting with her mantle before the angry bullocks. Once the fire from their nostrils actually scorched the cloak; he could see it smouldering. Once, daringly, carrying out the sport of Crete to perfection, Atalanta leaped nimbly, cloak and all, to the back of one of the bullocks. She rode it that way for several seconds, unfurling the crimson mantle in the face of the second beast. And then, limbs sleek with sweat, she was on the ground again, flashing this way and that with her cloak, wearing out the bullocks, tiring them, confusing them.

Jason had seen the same thing done in a motion picture of a bull fight. Eventually, if the matador knew his business, the huge animal was reduced to a slow, uncertain thing waiting stupidly for the death thrust of his cloak-draped sword.

Now Jason was running toward Atalanta, dragging the massive yokes and harness. To tire one bull, to confuse one and not the other, would hardly help. They had to both be stilled and lined up, wait-

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ing for the collar which would enslave them—

"Now!" Atalanta screamed. "Now!"

Snuffling, pawing the ground, their hides bathed in lather, the two bullocks were suddenly motionless. With all his strength, Jason lifted the double harness overhead and brought it down across their massive shoulders. They bellowed at once and set off at a furious gallop, Atalanta barely jumping to one side and covering her nakedness with the crimson cloak.

Jason clung to the reins grimly as the bullocks galloped wildly, trying to shake from their backs the unknown thing of metal and leather which had suddenly imprisoned them. Jason felt the reins slipping, his hands blistering as he pulled back on the reins, digging his heels into the soft earth. It is not possible, he told himself. One man cannot stop two beasts such as these with only the strength of his arms.

One man could not. But he was Jason, Captain of the Argo, not a man but a mythological hero, a demigod. The muscles stood out on his back, across his shoulders, he could feel the play of the muscles on his arms and chest—

And slowly, very slowly, he brought the wild bullocks to a halt. They pawed the ground nervously. They tried to turn their massive heads and see the puny man who had succeeded in capturing them, but he held the reins firmly, wrapping several coils of them about his wrists.

"The dragon's seed," Atalanta said, approaching him. She slung a strapped pouch from his shoulder, then stopped fearless before Jason, between him and the bullocks, to lower the bronze blade of the plow.

"Keep back," he said.

"I'll walk at your side," Atalanta told him simply.

He walked the bullocks slowly, the plow turning a deep furrow in the earth as they went. Into this through the fingers of his right hand he sowed the dragon's seed. There was not a sound from the hills which surrounded the great amphitheater. All Colchis was watching this deed—speechless, unbelieving, stunned.

When the seed pouch was empty, Jason released the reins, half-expecting the bullocks to turn on him and Atalanta. Instead, they galloped off toward the cavern from which they had come, dragging the plow behind them.

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Jason placed his hand on Atalanta's shoulder, smiling. He had forgotten the dragon's teeth.

"Jason—"

He whirled, hearing a loud clamor behind him. He blinked and knew in all his days he would not forget this sight. Full-grown warriors, armed to the teeth—hundreds of them, bearded and fierce of visage—were rising from the freshly plowed furrow.

Who sows the dragon's teeth shall reap . . . It was written in the ancient legends he knew so well.

"For Zeus and Colchis!" the leader of the warriors cried, and, sword upraised, charged at Jason.

Amazingly, he was calm. He had never felt such calm in all his life although never, until this moment, had he faced such peril. Like Atalanta, he was unarmed. There must have been five-hundred warriors, grouping behind their leader in a deadly phalanx. They were armed with spear and sword. They wore greaves of bronze, cuirasses of hide and pale blue mantles of Colchian azure. And there was murder in their eyes.

And Jason, facing death in this world and hoping for life in another, stood calmly, sure of himself, and came up heft-

ing a large stone in his right hand. He waited until the leader of the warriors was almost upon him, then hurled the stone.

It struck the leader's shoulder, stunning him. Instead of continuing toward Jason, he whirled on the man nearest him and smote him with his short sword. Instantly, as if Jason was the director of some epic play, all the warriors fell on one another, forgetting their all-but-helpless quarry.

Atalanta turned away, burying her face against Jason's chest. He stood watching, fascinated. He wanted this memory to take back with him. It would last for all the days of his life, and if ever—back in the Twentieth Century—he longed for a world long dead, he would remember this scene, this wild battle of berserk warriors, and be content with what he had.

Their swords flashed in the sunlight, their spears sped at one another with quick death, as it had been written. Jason remembered the words from his favorite book on the subject:

"And then Jason did hurl a stone among the warriors and they fell on one another with death in

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their eyes and did do battle until not one of them was left alive on the plain of Colchis, their blood running like a river in the furrow Jason had sowed with the teeth of the dragon . . .

When the carnage came to an end, the prophetic words had been fulfilled. Body piled on dead body, the new-born warriors sprawled in the furrow, their blood running red . . .

A wild clamor resounded from the hills. "The fleece! The Golden Fleece! He has earned it! To Jason the Golden Fleece . . ."

Linking his arm with Atalanta's, he walked boldly toward the royal box. King Aetes' face was very pale but his daughter's was livid with rage. She was not looking at Jason; her eyes saw only Atalanta, walking at his side, arm linked in his.

Aetes' voice trembled. "The Golden Fleece is yours," he said. "It shall be delivered to your ship, the Argo." He would say no more.

The Princess Medea, however, stood up and lifted her hand. "Hercules!" she called in an imperious voice. And armed with a great gnarled club, Hercules leaped from the tier behind the royal box, to land directly in front of Jason.

The crowd was stunned to silence, but Atalanta said, "Fool. Don't you remember? You're a Greek."

"I vowed that Jasón would not get the Golden Fleece."

"And I," said another voice. It was Peleus who, armed with a short Lacedaemonian sword, took his place beside Hercules.

Jason whispered to Atalanta, "Do they know of your bull-baiting? Have they been to Crete?"

"I don't think so."

"Then fetch the two bullocks."

Atalanta was off at a run and Hercules taunted Jason: "She won't fight at your side now."

Instead of answering, Jason removed his mantle, whirled it overhead and let its folds billow across Hercules' head. Muttering an oath, the giant swung his club. But Jason was already leaping aside and turning to face Peleus who came to finish him with one thrust of the short sword.

Jason waited until the last moment, then ducked under Peleus' outstretched arm, grabbing it at the elbow and, spinning deftly, dropping to one knee and sending Peleus

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spinning over his head at Hercules, who had succeeded in removing the cloak from his face. They fell together in a tangle of arms and legs and Jason, not waiting until they could regain their advantage, leaped at them and plucked Peleus' sword from his hand.

Hercules climbed to his feet, roared a challenge, and charged with his upraised sword, and a third of the club. He brought it down in a savage arc which Jason met with Peleus' gnarled club, the thick end, was sliced off and fell at Hercules' feet.

Jason was about to press his advantage, but just then Atalanta came running into view, holding her crimson cloak aloft, the eyes of the two bullocks on it as they galloped after her, dragging the plowshare behind them.

Kill Hercules now? Jason thought. The man deserved it—but a wonderful legend would die with him. And if this distant untamed world was not one Jason could learn to love, he could not learn to hate the legends of it which had always captured his heart. Orpheus was wise, he thought. Orpheus would not sing of this Hercules, but of the Hercules whose deeds would thrill a million million youths for the next few thousand years . . .

"Here," Jason said, tossing the sword hilt-first to Peleus. "You'll need it."

Atalanta fastened her cloak as the bullocks loomed up behind her. Hercules and Peleus, armed with half a club and a short sword, turned to face the beasts.

"Come," Jason said.

"Back to the Argo, my love?"

"This poor body will return to the Argo and claim the Golden Fleece for Greece. Or rather, Orpheus will claim it for Jason, for Jason will be mindless once more. Medea can go with him if she wants, but I—"

"Yes, my love?"

"I go elsewhere. Listen to me, Atalanta. I have no right to ask you to come. You may loathe my world, you may be unable to adjust to it as I am unable to adjust to yours. But if you're willing—"

"Wherever you go, I want to go," she said simply.

He took her hand. An effort of will, he thought. It would take a tremendous effort of will. Once done, though, he knew the bridge to heroic Greece could forever be sundered . . .

"Atalanta," he murmured, clutching her hand as the am-

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phitheater and the green hills began to fade . . .

He awoke in his own furnished room. It was dark and he went to the wall to put on the light. "Atalanta?" he called softly.

"I am here."

He stood for a moment at the light switch, not daring to turn it on. He was small, thin, a runt of a man compared with the mighty Jason. But this was his world and he belonged here, and if Atalanta could learn to adjust to it, to tame civilization and to a man whose strength was as nothing compared to hers . . .

He put on the light.

"Who are you?" he gasped, looking at the girl standing there and watching him. She was small, perhaps five-two in height. She had mousey hair but he liked the way it was arranged. She wore a skirt and blouse and while her figure was not breath-takingly lovely like Atalanta's, it was curved in the right places.

"I—" she said. She could not go on for a time. "I was hoping, when first I saw you."

"Wait a minute!" he cried. "The way you spoke about Atalanta that morning on the Argo, in the third person, as if you spoke of someone else—"

"Yes," she said softly. "You are Jason?"

"I'm Jason. But you—"

"I was back there longer than you. The moment you entered Jason's body and gave him sanity, I—I loved you. I was afraid you loved only Atalanta and wouldn't have me, not the real me, not the me back here, or my world either. When you said those strange things, I didn't dare hope . . ."

"Then you're from this world too!"

"Yes. Oh, yes!"

"And you wanted to come back but not without me, but you were afraid of what I would think, back here—with the real you!"

"Yes, Jason. I'm sorry. I hope I won't disappoint you. I . . . I'll go away."

He looked at her. He said nothing. They had their memories of adventure. And now, their souls cemented by those memories, they would have each other. Two plain people, two ordinary people, with a lot of wonderful memories and a wonderful future together.

"Come here," he said. Outside, a horn blared. A bus rumbled away from the curb. It was a very different world, but they were home.

THE END

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BY THE READERS

Dear Mr. Browne:

First off, I want to say that I'm not an avid fan of any one magazine. I read all the "Fantasy" I can find, and enjoy it immensely.

Recently, there has been quite a thing about the word "Fantasy"—pure and otherwise.

Well, this may sound like it isn't an opinion at all, but "fantasy" to me means, fantastic. Imagination. Fiction.

It could be an old-fashioned space opera, or a story about fairies, and would still be, to me, fantasy.

I read fiction for enjoyment, relaxation and escape. Neurotic? No. Normal. Anyone who reads periodicals as often as I do is either an escapist or nuts. Fiction is escape literature. Check?

I don't like to pick apart stories, or collections of stories, as it takes all the fun out of reading and turns one into a critic, and as far as I can see, the criticism field is already overcrowded.

Instead, I just read. I read stf for years before I realized that some authors had written as many as 8 or 10 stories that had already appeared in stf magazines.

Naturally, I take notice when a story is really exceptional. The ones that stand out are "Slan" and another by Bradbury, whose title I don't remember.

I never even took the time to write a letter before, but your

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request for the thoughts of your non-corresponding readers caught me at a slack moment.

Fantastic is great, and I have no complaint at all. As long as the stories are well written and imaginative, you'll get my money every time, regardless of "purity."

I will go out of line far enough to say that I like my "fantasy" on the light side.

Don Butler
43 Hess Ave.
Erie, Penn.

● *The purists say that "fiction based on the logical extrapolation of known science" is science fiction; purely imaginative fiction based on nothing more tangible than pure flights of fancy is fantasy. Frankly, we feel that the distinction is largely academic, since the purpose of both is to entertain . . . And, believe us, you don't have to be either "escapist" or "nuts" to enjoy any type of fiction, whether it be stf or detective stories or a political speech.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Until now my only contact with editors has been through submission of my lousy manuscripts and receipt of rejection slips. In all this time I have been content to be numbered among the silent majority, more interested in what others had to say. Now I must add my small voice and leave it to you to decide its value. A conflict seems to have arisen over Mr. Bradbury's position in the field of Imaginative Writing. On this subject I can and intend to wax eloquent.

In every field is one man who, comparatively speaking, cannot be called a giant, or even the leader among his fellows. But that one man will have more of the true essence of his calling than the others and when people think of that particular field of endeavor his name is thought of first. Tho Babe Ruth hit more homers than anyone else, many hit far better averages, struck out less, fielded better and in many ways were far better players than he, and yet what man has become Mr. Baseball?

Many men have and do play better violin than Fritz Kreisler, but what violinist won the hearts and acclaim of the common man as he? There, I think, is the big difference.

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Greater technicians can always be found, but no greater musician. There was something of himself in everything he played, and he was the sort of man that embodied a little of what everyone else had, and so there was something of them too in his music.

Mr. Ray Bradbury is the very essence of what he writes. He has brought poetry and music to a field of literature that needs and deserves it. Instead of reaching for the stars and dragging them down to him, he has tried to pull himself up to them and in the process pull us up with him. He reaches in where you can't scratch, not because he's trying to but because that is the way he is. Although I don't know the man, and I wish I did, I feel as though I do. He has the ability to say more than the words he writes. One little gem about a woman finding faith in a power station is a good example. Maybe the man doesn't realize the effect he has on people who aren't even the least bit interested in science-fiction. I know many people who cannot stand to read anything remotely connected with Science, in fiction or non-fiction, who read Bradbury and when finished will sit and gaze off in the distance with the most serene expression I've ever seen.

Would that I could write one-hundredth of a fraction like him, but it could never be done. What he writes is a reflection of himself, which seems to be a blend of every one else. To me science-fiction and Ray Bradbury are one and the same. He has taught me one thing which not only might be the answer to my success as a writer but in many other ways. Write, not what you feel, or think, but what you are. If what you are is good, what you do will be good.

Don de Noyer
115 Warren St.
Glens Falls, N. Y.

● *Amen.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Your local mail carrier has probably either resigned in despair, or else purchased a small pick-up truck to handle the mail resulting from the August issue. I suppose, like a lot of readers, I would never have written a letter to an editor, for any reason; but your specific invitation changed that.

I think science fiction is far above the average fiction avail-

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able in current magazines and books. It's true that once in a while non-science fiction comes up with an outstanding contribution to literature, but so does science fiction. And to me, science fiction is much more fascinating, because it stimulates imagination and awakens what is (in my case, at least) a dormant desire to learn. What else but science-fiction would send a middle-aged housewife like myself to the library for books on space-flight possibilities, rockets, and the universe itself? Admittedly, I'm not an expert on what is good science fiction and what is bad science fiction, and I suppose I'm not very discriminating, because I simply buy ALL the magazines I can find, read them all, enjoying some more than others and then try to pass the magazine on to someone else. I want to bring something to your attention here: I cannot subscribe to the magazines because my husband's business keeps us traveling. We are usually in a town for about three months, and very often in a small town the local drug store or magazine store will carry one or two different science fiction magazines and that's all. I have asked the owners or clerks of these different drug stores why they didn't carry a larger variety. They have told me "because that's all the distributor leaves me." And when I have told them that I will take one copy of each different issue of any and all of the science fiction magazines if they will order them for me, they say that they have to take what the distributor leaves for them. If that is true, (and I see no reason to doubt them), something should be done about the distributor's neglect.

My pet hate has to do with the letter columns. The letters that start out:

"Dear Editor:

In re joe blow's letter in the last issue! The man must be out of his mind!!! Any school child knows that the rotating body must assume a lenticular shape at the stage of contraction when the ratio of the polar radius—etc. etc."

Thank you for a great deal of enjoyment derived from the pages of *Fantastic.*

Mrs. Paul Dutton
Box 363
Zion, Illinois

● *It takes all kinds of letters, like all kinds of people, Mrs.*

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Dutton, to make a magazine, or a world. The readers who tell us what's good or bad about each story are as welcome here as the reader who raises the roof because an author tries to make him believe that tranzing the frammis will get a space-ship to Mars in twenty seconds flat. You happen to be the sort of reader all editors include in their prayers (sure they do!), and may your shadow never grow less. Only please don't get incensed at the distributors; they have their troubles, believe us!—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I am glad to see the letter column back; now I can feel free to express a number of my long-standing gripes.

I have long been a S-F fan, but like many of us old-timers, I wonder what has happened to the media. No originality anymore—; I see that even you, the editor, understand this and try to explain it away with the lack of good authors. Ray Bradbury, the only original thinker in S-F: What nonsense! There is only seven basic plots to stories, I have heard, and the trouble isn't in the lack of ideas, but in the degeneration of science-fiction itself. It has become vulgarized to suit popular taste. Years ago, when there were only a handful of S-F mags around, I could consider myself a pseudo-authority on BEMS, extra-terrestrial beings, and the lot. Now, every kid on the block has a ray-gun and even flying saucers are passé. Maybe, it's just growing up, but there seems to be no freshness left; I read *Fantastic* and *Amazing* purely from habit. I don't know what can be done about it, but I do have a suggestion.

I remember back when Amazing Stories was several hundred pages long; then rising costs forced its number of pages down, and then "it turned respectable" and went into digest size. The first issues of both *Fantastic* and *Amazing* were exceedingly good. I, along with many of my brethren, thought that perhaps it was a turn for the better; now I realize I was wrong; what you have is a digest-size pulp. Read even the inside cover where the authors write their life history. The pattern is exactly the same everytime, not even are the words changed; the stories are for the most part pretty dull and short. The August issue of *Fantastic* is a prime example: nothing worth reading in it. Why not combine *Fantastic* and

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Amazing and call it *Fantastically Amazing* or *Amazingly Fantastic,* put it out once a month, and charge the original 25 cents. We're paying 35 cents for mags not worth ½ that price. I notice you put back features and departments because the readers wanted them; well, I'm sure everybody realizes that to put these back meant a loss of story space, bad as they sometimes are. Yet no matter how inept the stories, that's why we buy the mags, not because of the features. I think if you took a poll of readers you'd find that we do want longer stories, and especially serials, though I can't really see why this should entirely preclude them; but in any case, even if you don't want to go back to pulp size, why not give us one big digest size a month, instead of two small mediocre mags?

Joseph W. Berlinger
Crow Hill Road
Mt. Kisco, N. Y.

● *We agree with very little you say here. Nostalgia, pure and simple, is largely responsible for your talk of "the good old days." To the reader still in the first flush of youth, today's adventurous science-fiction is as filled with excitement and thrills as it was when you were an authority on "BEMs, extra-terrestrial beings, and the lot." . . . We do agree that longer stories, richer in detail, incident, characters and plot, would make a lot of readers happy. Maybe we can do something about it if you'll just be patient a while longer . . .*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Picked up the August issue of *Fantastic* at the drugstore today, and just finished reading it through. (Why August in May? Usually magazines only get one or two months ahead of themselves. But I suppose it's better than waiting till August for it.)

The pics were good, although I missed seeing Finlay again. Kotzky and Beecham both seem to have styles that print well, which makes a big difference. On the subject of the pictures, I'd like to make a stand against the vast crowd of readers that want the illustrators to read the stories first. It doesn't leave them any room for imagination, and also it sometimes gives away the ending. The story by Milton Lesser was kind of spoiled for me by the picture of the spaceship being sabo-

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taged, because there was supposed to be some doubt whether they would succeed in doing it or not.

I regretfully agree with you about there being no market for pure fantasy. The trouble is, there aren't very many good fantasy stories written. But if you come across a writer like Collier print something by him and I'll buy four or five copies to make up for your circulation loss.

I don't see much reason for changing your title-page format to squeeze in the word-count on the stories. You can figure their length by subtracting the page number from the page number of the next story, just like with a checkbook. Besides, I usually get interested and read all the way through without stopping.

I notice that fifteen out of fifteen of the letters in the April column start with "Dear Editor". Have you been using your blue pencil? Most of the S-F letter columns have a few less couth epithets here and there from the unsatisfied brethren.

As for the stories, they were all medium-good except the Lesser yarn, which was plain good, and the story by Dick Purcell, which was medium-good but really excellent for a first story, if you see what I mean. At least, I presume it's a first, as I haven't seen the name before. I hope to see his novel when he gets around to writing it, and meanwhile I hope you will print his stories and give him some practice.

Anthony Low
Claverly 43
Cambridge 38, Mass.

● *All right, Brother Low, point by point: a) this predating of magazines is to create the illusion of their having been distributed about ten minutes before. We agree; it's reached the point of being ridiculous; b) we'll go along with your reaction to having the illustrations* too *true to detail; c) your method of computing the length of a story sounds so simple and reasonable that we hereby drop all considerations of using the word count on the contents page; d) so many readers have asked us to use the salutation as it appears on letters, that we've dropped the stereotyped "Dear Editor"; Dick Purcell will be back—although he's not going to like that "practice" crack of yours! Incidentally, your letter wins the matted illustration as the best this issue!*—ED.

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sume that I, some supernatural power, approve of this immorality of yours."

"But—"

"I don't approve of it. I don't disapprove of it. Frankly, I just don't care about it. Or about you. Yes, I'm a supernatural power. But you don't know what kind, do you? Incidentally, I have already called the police. They should be here shortly."

"What kind, Smathers?"

"We had a mixup in the records. The records are very important. Mixups are not permitted. Something had to be done about it. These two were supposed to die, were expected. When they did not, I was assigned the task. I am from the accounting office, Hunter."

"But you congratulated me on my decision to lead an amoral life. You said—"

"I knew a good thing when I saw one. Because I knew you would tire of making money effortlessly, of taking women when they found it hard to resist you. I knew eventually you would get around to this. I waited. Now I can close the account on these two."

Far off, Ben Hunter heard the sound of a police siren.

"Thank you," Mr. Smathers said, and vanished.

The trial lasted only three days. Everything was against Ben Hunter. His change of face, the death of his partner, his amoral love life. The jury hated him and while such things are not supposed to matter, they mattered. He had fired the Magnum. He didn't deny it. Self-defense, he said. The dog. But Blandings? they asked him. And Mrs. Wilder? They weren't even armed.

The district attorney didn't like him, either. The State had looked foolish last time. A Governor's pardon for no sound reason. It had been minimized by the Governor's office. They had said no comment, after his release. Now they were out to get him, somehow he could sense that. Of course, they never learned about Mr. Smathers, nor how Ben Hunter had been released the first time.

The jury deliberated less than an hour, and returned the verdict everyone expected.

His spirits remained high until the very end. He waited confidently for Mr. Smathers.

But this time, Mr. Smathers did not come. **THE END**

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—Continued from Back Cover

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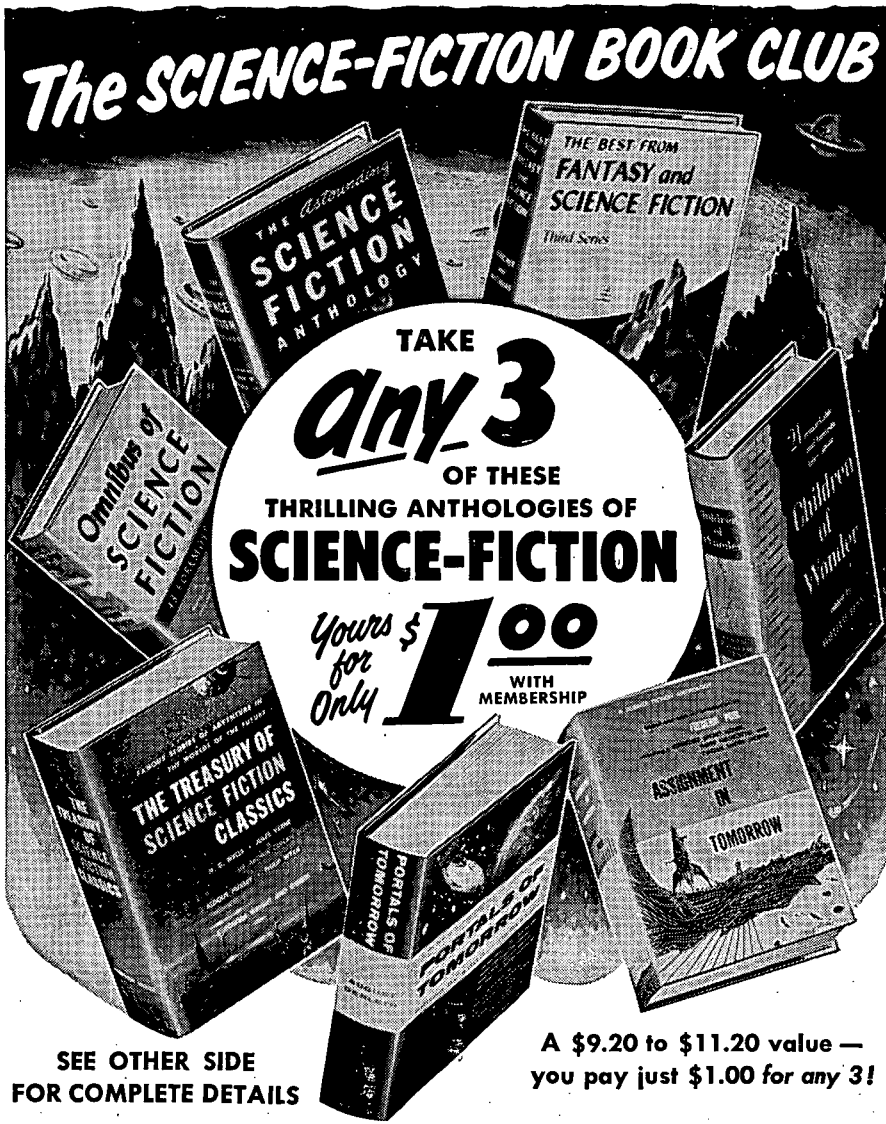

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